3 BAD MEN

Photoplay Title Of

OVER THE BORDER

HERMAN WHITAKER

Many happy returns of
the Day.

To "Rennie" Burgess
from
5/18/27 Helen N. Zych

A William Fox Picture. *Three Bad Men.*

OLIVE BORDEN AS LEE CARLTON
AND GEORGE O'BRIEN AS TOM NEVILLE.

THREE BAD MEN

BY

NELS LEROY JORGENSEN

Based on the Novel
"OVER THE BORDER"
By
HERMAN WHITAKER

ILLUSTRATED WITH SCENES
FROM THE PHOTOPLAY
A JOHN FORD PRODUCTION
A WILLIAM FOX PICTURE

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THREE BAD MEN

One bad man sits himself a-sunnin'—
Two bad men come along a-runnin'—
Three bad men all go out a-gunnin'.

Three bad men tearin' roun' wil'—
Bang goes a Colt. There's one less chil'—
Two bad men scatter dust fer a mile.

Two bad men an' a Winchester cracks—
One of 'em drops; the other makes tracks—
One bad man pays his last head tax.

They were three bad men, but they played fair—
May have toted guns, but they shot square—
They were three bad men, but gosh, they were *there!*

ALBERT S. NATHAN.

THREE BAD MEN

CHAPTER I

It was not mercy which restrained Bull from the final parting shots. Mercy was an unknown quality in his life. It was simply a cold, calm judgment. Bullets were useful; and beside, there were too many times when it was necessary to shoot to kill.

The border line between the United States and Canada lay just ahead; to the right, about a half mile along the dried bed of one of the tributaries to the creek that the three were approaching, could be seen the post marking the southern boundary of Canada.

Bull's glittering eyes turned in a last look over his shoulder; like everything else, there was energy to be conserved in even this movement. On either side of him rode his two companions, their pistols drawn. He shook his head silently.

Eyes no less cold or hard than his own received unspoken the command in the same silence. The three horses pounded on, nearer and nearer to the creek, shaded now with a clump of trees, cool and inviting in the heat of the afternoon.

Behind them the scarlet-coated horsemen urged on their mounts with voice and spur. Occasionally one of the long line would bring up a pistol and fire; but shots were not being wasted by the pursuers, either. The Mounted Police of the Dominion showed in their set, strained faces the respect in which they held the outlaws at whose heels they galloped.

Bull Stanley turned for a last glance behind him, just as the mount he rode found the edge of the declivity. He smiled—a grim, cold smile, mirthless.

"No use shootin' now—we might want to get back in Canada some day, and I ain't anxious to have the murder of a Mountie on my hands."

Into their holsters went the two revolvers as the mounts slid down the steep incline. The police behind were out of sight for a moment. Bull led the way, forcing his horse into the

shallow stream. A splash—a moment of hesitation—the creak of protesting saddle leather—and the three were on the farther side of the water.

Bull laughed harshly:

"U.S.! But let's get outa pistol shot!"

On his right hand, the slender, granite-faced man in a tall, incongruous high hat, permitted himself a grim smile.

"Yeah. Maybe they ain't so particular about shootin' as we're gettin' to be. And we sure got 'em riled up this time."

They spurred their mounts up the long incline until the three came to a halt at the top. Bull held up his hand; under his wide sombrero, his eyes were narrow, stony slits when he turned to look back. The Mounted Police had halted; their scarlet uniforms shone in vivid, startling contrast against the green and the shade of the creek bed where they had pulled up.

"Reckon they're boilin'," Bull considered.

On his other hand, the shorter of the three riders was drawing a pistol thoughtfully. Mike Costigan's tiny eyes were not bloodthirsty; his unshaven face was not even particularly venge-

ful. Rather, he seemed essentially to merit the name he had won—"the Python."

"Maybe we better send a little shot down there—huh, Bull? It might get some bird who'd remember our faces."

Bull turned stern eyes upon him. "I said no shootin' unless it's necessary," he replied, his deep voice low and hard. "An' as for faces, there ain't a man north of that line who'll ever forget ours."

Mike Costigan shrugged philosophically and reluctantly let his pistol slip back into the holster.

"Well, we're back in the U.S.A.," he muttered. "I sure feel better here, anyhow."

A grunt from Spade Allen, who had been silent, made him look up. Bull also turned his impassive eyes upon their companion.

"The U.S.A.!" Spade scoffed. "There's more sheriffs in this country than there is Mounties across the line, pardner. An' there's more lariats waitin' to swing us over a tree-limb."

Bull Stanley's heavy lips twisted into a sneer of contempt. He looked from one to the other of his companions.

"You birds are sure gettin' anxious about sheriffs an' tree-limbs these days. First thing yuh know you'll be confessin' yore sins in the hope o' becomin' whole, like the preacher says. Shut up, and let's get gallopin'—we gotta find a town where we ain't known."

The other two looked at him. There was no sign of softness nor mercy in any of the three faces; their eyes were the eyes of born killers and bad men. But there was no refutation for Bull's words. His words were law. It was not a matter of fear; it was simply so. Each of them in turn had faced men as dangerous as Bull, across the smoke of vicious six-guns, and each was still alive.

Mike Costigan—the Python, drew with the sleek speed of the snake from which he had taken his name. Murders—some in self-defense and others not, were credited against him in more towns west of the Mississippi than he dared count, in spite of his mild, homely features and wizened frame.

Spade Allen was wanted in a dozen towns. Crooked gambling had brought a noose near his neck more than once—and straight shooting had removed its menace for the time being.

As for Bull, few men knew his past. Cold, hard, calculating, he was respected as a dangerous gunman, with a record from the Mexican border nearly to Hudson's Bay. He spoke but little; his vicious, hard mouth seemed sealed. No one ever questioned him, not even the two who shared his fortunes. They knew him for a killer, they knew he had shrunk before nothing. He was one of their own kind; but underneath the animal brutality of the born fighter there was a cold, calculating reasoning power about Bull which made him the leader.

If it was love they had for one another—even the instinctive love of outlaws thrown together—none of them knew it. They were as dangerous, as heartless among themselves as they were to outsiders. A common enemy—the Law, welded them into their band, and a lack of purpose sealed the companionship.

It had been early morning when they crossed the shallow creek into the country which had mothered them all. From a battered haversack Mike Costigan had produced enough supplies, at noontime, to warrant a stop for coffee and bacon. That exhausted their food, and they

rode on, southward, along the border of Dakota, empty of life for miles on end.

Silently they rode, unspeaking, each preoccupied with the same thought. Where would they go next; where, in this wilderness, find shelter and their next venture?

At what moment, no matter what town they found, would they be recognized, faced with the guns of indignant citizens—possibly a rope—at least, a warning to move on? Money was low; their last exploit north of the border had been a signal failure from which they had barely escaped with their lives.

From time to time, as the steady pace wore on through the afternoon hours, Spade Allen or Mike Costigan would glance sidewise at their companion's granite face. But he looked neither to right nor left. As a conversationalist, Bull rivaled the Sphinx. There was, however, a deadly, set purpose behind the frozen mask of his features as he rode with his eyes on the southern horizon; a purpose that seemed to communicate itself to the two on either side of him.

As though, in spite of all else, Bull had set his course toward a definite spot.

There had been that about Bull, from the beginning. Aimless though his existence appeared to be, he seemed always intent upon getting somewhere; his cold, impassive eyes seemed continually to be fixed upon some object that lay ahead.

Costigan, as the three drew up slightly in order to pass through a narrow defile, glanced at Spade, who was gnawing in silence at the end of a tobacco plug. Mike put out his hand.

"Chaw, Spade?"

Spade looked at him out of angry eyes. His narrow, cruel face was unshaven, and under the strange plug hat, his features took on the bitter ruthlessness of stone. Mike met him eye to eye, with his unmoved, thoughtfully remote stare. After an interval, Spade reluctantly passed the square of tobacco.

"That's the last," he said. "An' no food in sight."

Mike nodded and sank his teeth into it. Spade watched him avidly. Bull turned, looked from one to the other without expression; and then, as they came out of the defile onto the summit of a long, rolling hill, faced forward again.

"There's a town," he vouchsafed.

The others came up. The sun was nearing the horizon and the pangs of hunger were making themselves felt. Also it was hot—desperately hot. They drew up at sight of smoke spirals across the plain; smoke, and a blot of darker hue against the horizon which signified the outflung shacks of some frontier settlement.

It was Spade who spied the rest.

"Town, huh?" he grunted. "Sure is, and a little welcome committee between it an' us. Looks like our comin' was prepared for, *amigos.*"

As he spoke, the sunlight picked up shining gun-barrels and the glistening nickel of horses' accouterments. Just emerging from a slight depression in the rolling country between the three men and the village, there rode into clear view a line of ten or twelve mounted men, headed directly for them.

CHAPTER II

Bull gave no sign that he had seen; Spade said no more. Mike sat his saddle indifferently, his eyes fixed with a philosophic aloofness on the rapidly approaching posse. There was no need of speech; each of the three knew what it meant.

There was no need of running, either. Their mounts were worn from the furious chase on the farther side of the line and the long ride of that day. If it happened to be a town where any of them were wanted for any of their numerous crimes, it meant but one thing—they would have to shoot it out, side by side, and finish here at the top of the sunny knoll. No necessity for comment there.

Spade Allen's satirical features twisted as Bull moved forward, halting under a clump of three trees.

"What was that about bein' glad to be back in old U.S.A., Mike?" he asked scornfully.

But Mike made no reply. His fingers touched

the butt of his six-gun where it reposed in its holster; that was all. He waited. Bull waited, too, slightly in front of the other two, his horse drawn up to face the oncoming line. They could distinguish the crude nickel star on the vest of the man riding ahead of the group now—his sign of office.

"Know him?" Bull muttered, between tight lips, as the sheriff came to be seen.

Mike only shook his head, though Bull could not see him, nor did he turn to find out. Spade followed suit.

"I don't know what town it is, but they ain't got anything on me up in this section," he declared. "Somebody just passed word we was comin', that's all."

Bull gave a brief nod. His icy eyes ranged from one end of the line of stern-visaged men to the other, and finally came to rest on the sheriff as the latter drew up his mount. The men behind him spread out now in a half-circle. Instinctively, the man of the law seemed to recognize Bull for the leader. He spurred his mount until he sat eye to eye with the outlaw.

"We're a delegation o' citizens from Larimo, pard," he said quietly.

Spade's features twisted into an ironical grin. "Come to welcome us, sheriff?"

"Yeah." The sheriff fixed him with a dark look and the silent men behind him shifted their rifles conspicuously. One of them loosened a lariat at his saddle horn. "We come to welcome yuh, all right. To welcome yuh down the trail."

He turned back to Bull. "We know yuh, Bull Stanley, an' we ain't mixin' words. This territory ain't goin' to be no safe place for yore gang—so *keep movin'!*"

Bull hesitated a moment, then swung from his saddle. His eyes still met those of the sheriff squarely.

"We was just thinkin' o' makin' camp here," he said. "Reckon we'll go ahead."

The circle moved closer, more threatening now, and the sheriff leapt from the saddle. He gripped Bull's arm. But in the same instant, Mike Costigan's horse had taken a leap and a knife flashed. Its point, as Mike leaned far out of the saddle, was at the sheriff's throat.

"Hands off!"

Mike was smiling; his face, except for his eyes, was innocent and friendly. But the

sheriff knew that voice. He dropped back a pace and Bull straightened.

"All right, boys," the sheriff returned, calm as ever. At his signal, three lariats swung clear, and three of his men threw the ropes over a jutting limb of the nearest tree. Bull regarded it calmly; Mike Costigan studied the preparations speculatively.

The officer of the law turned back with a grim smile.

"Well, do yuh go or do yuh stay?" he wanted to know. "It don't matter particularly to us, only we've decided that if yuh wants to stay in Larimo—yuh stay as corpses!"

Mike and Spade were paying no further attention to the officer of the law. Their eyes were fixed on Bull, calmly, impassively, awaiting his move or word. Bull was staring at the three significant ropes. At last he nodded.

"I never did believe in unnecessary killin'," he said coolly; and with the words, swung up into his saddle. "We're headin' farther down the trail, sheriff"—he hesitated—"an' I hope some day yuh'll take it into yore head to travel down that way. *Adios—amigos!*"

And putting spurs to his mount, he whirled,

circled and galloped off, Mike Costigan and Spade Allen in his wake. The sheriff and his posse stood silent, watching them until their retreat was no more than a dust-cloud against the southern horizon.

Slowly, as the sun was sinking and the tired mounts found more level country under their hoofs, Bull settled into a walk. The two drew up beside him. For a long time there was silence: the ill-humored but fatalistic silence of hungry men who are philosophers.

At length—

"We don't seem popular, Bull," came Spade's quiet voice. "Where yuh headin'?"

"South." Bull's eyes were still on the horizon. "I got tuh find somethin', Spade, and it must be south."

Saying which, he relapsed again into silence and rode on. His massive shoulders were more powerful than ever in the gloom that enveloped them with dusk. Spade's puny figure, if anything, was more slender; his incongruous stovepipe hat stuck up like a scarecrow's head. Mike's squat, wizened figure sank deeper and deeper in the saddle, but his mild eyes searched the plain musingly.

Thus the three pariahs rode on southward through the dark, toward that something which Bull must find. As dark came, they were like three moving ghosts, belonging nowhere, searching in silence for the haunts of their own kind, from which they were exiled.

CHAPTER III

They had rolled up in blankets before midnight, and were on their way again before dawn, moving southward. West of them, the Dakota prairie unrolled, a wide expanse that seemed at a distance to have the even surface of a billiard table, dotted here and there with clumps of grass and odd growth.

The unopened territory! When the three had passed this way last, it had been an Indian reservation. Events had transpired in the meantime; the Dakotas had taken on a new significance to a watching world, but of this the three silent riders knew nothing.

Silent . . . more silent now than the day before, as though each realized how dangerous speech might be. Their nerves, none too ruly at best, were worn raw by the long flight. Hunger had lighted a tiny flame in their eyes—a predatory, wicked light. Flashing side-glances were pregnant with warning. From

time to time, Spade fingered a deck of cards with the easy manipulation of a born gambler; and then he would return them to his soiled waistcoat pocket again.

Only Bull seemed unaware of privation or misfortune. It was seldom he chewed tobacco: occasionally he would roll himself a brown paper cigarette as he rode, to stifle the pangs of hunger. But even his supply of grain tobacco was growing thin.

Their eyes were fixed now upon a huge dust-cloud moving slowly across the southern horizon. It had appeared with the sun and as the day advanced took on larger and more definite proportions. A long line it was, stretching for miles into the haze eastward, disappearing in the heat—devils rising shimmering from the ground.

A dip in the terrain blotted it from view for more than half an hour as they rode onward, each unconsciously urging his pace out of curiosity. The length of the cloud was startling. What tremendous hegira, except the march of regiments of cavalry, could be causing that baffling cloud?

The summit of the hill loomed ahead; Bull

spurred upward toward the top, and a frown had appeared even between his cold eyes. The broad reaches of the Red River ran to the right of them. Where could this great movement be bound, except toward the desolate Dakota plains—and why?

In the late summer of 1876, when the three had ridden north, Dakota had been the playground of the Indians who had been pushed westward from the Mississippi, ever westward. Now, a year later—what could have transpired in the meantime?

Bull reached the top of the rise—and with an oath he jerked on his bridle. His mount came to an abrupt stop. The others pulled in beside him, startled, staring at the strange, moving scene below them.

For miles on end, covering the entire plain, straggling from every direction, they came—south and east, following no roads and apparently obeying no guides: an endless procession of horses, wagons, every variety of vehicle on wheels, cows and sheep straggling after covered prairie schooners, dogs barking at the heels of horses or mules, men, women and children, mounted or afoot—miles and miles of them,

like the Israelites being delivered out of the bondage of Egypt.

To the startled eyes of the three watchers there was something of awesome magnificence in the sight. It was unexplainable, impossible, void of reason or sanity—yet it was so!

At last, blinking away his disbelief, Bull turned upon his companions.

"They're going somewhere, that's certain," he said.

Mike nodded. "Yeah. An' there must be a few in that bunch that don't know us," he reflected.

Bull shot him a quick glance. Then, "Wait here," he commanded. "I'm goin' to find out."

He dug in his spurs and started down the slope. Mike and Spade watched his heavy shoulders sway easily with the pace of his mount as he headed toward where a series of three wagons, drawn by four-horse teams, were negotiating the base of the hill. A young man, clean-shaven and cool, with the acquiline, yet fearless features of a New Englander, looked up from the seat of the foremost wagon at Bull's imperious hail. Beside him sat a woman of about his own age nursing a babe.

"Where's this posse headin' for, pardner?" the outlaw demanded as he drew up.

The man scrutinized his heavy, dangerous features with no outward appearance of fear.

"Gosh, where you been, stranger?" he demanded. "Don't you know the Government's goin' to open up the Dakotas?"

"What for?" Bull frowned.

"Gold!" Enthusiastically the young farmer dove into the tale of untold riches beyond the boundary—of the discovery of gold on the land of the Indians, and of the subsequent deal made between the natives and the United States Government, whereby the territory could be opened up.

"We're all congregatin' up near Fargo," Bull's informer went on. "New town opened up—Custer. At twelve o'clock noon on September twenty-fifth, the land is opened and it's every man for himself. Take whatever claim you like and stake it out. It's every man's chance, stranger—you must 'a' been buried somewhere to miss the news of it—they're comin' from all over the States."

He flung out his hand in a careless gesture to indicate the train moving steadily along for

miles. Bull nodded. The woman in the seat nudged her husband and he nodded. Thrusting a crumpled sheet of paper into Bull's hand, he grabbed the reins.

"There's part o' the proclamation. Now I got to be movin', stranger. So long. See y' in Custer, I hope. My name's Eric Jonson, and this is my wife and the new kid."

Cheerily he started off. Bull nodded, none too pleasantly, for it was not his custom to be pleasant; and when the wagon had moved on, he looked down at the paper in his hand. It was the full text of the president's proclamation on the opening of the lands in the Black Hills of Dakota; Bull's unaccustomed eyes ran rapidly down the sheet until he came to the meat of the message:

". . . United States and the Sioux Nation. Now, therefore, I, Ulysses S. Grant, President of the United States of America, do hereby make known that the lands acquired from the Sioux tribes will at the hour of twelve o'clock noon of the 25th day of September, 1877, be opened to all. From a starting line designated by the military at Fargo."

Bull became aware that he was not alone. The little knot of wagons which had taken the base of the hill had passed on. Far out, in straggling groups, the travelers from the east and south pressed on toward Fargo.

Gold!

Bull turned at last to meet the eyes of Spade Allen, which had been devouring the Proclamation. Mike, too, was reading over his shoulder. Hunger had been forgotten.

To the three men, this rush meant one thing beyond all others. Lawlessness, gold—wealth. New lands, where there was no law or tradition, ungoverned men; life that depended on the speed of a pistol draw, and gold that was for the strongest. There would be no one here who knew their records; if there were, they would not dare question. When it came to law made by men and pistols, the three who had just returned to the United States feared nothing.

"Here's where we make up for the lean days," whispered Spade softly, and from his waistcoat he drew out again the perennial pack of cards.

Bull turned from him to Mike. The latter

nodded quietly, one eyebrow cocked over eyes that were a trifle shrewder now.

"This was sure made for us, Bull. I told yuh good old U.S.A. was the place—what with gold rushes and tenderfeet who ain't so quick on the draw." He fingered the butt of his forty-five lovingly.

Bull grunted. But neither avarice nor relief stamped his cruel features.

"We're goin' to Custer," he said. "*He* might be there."

"*He?*" The word came simultaneously from the lips of Spade and Mike.

Bull nodded. "Yeah. I'm still lookin' for somethin' and Custer, from the signs o' things, is the likeliest place to find it. Come on!"

CHAPTER IV

CUSTER was miles away and the mounts ridden by the three outlaws were tired. Keeping to the upper edges of the hills, from which vantage they could survey the moving families strung out over the prairie, they took a slow pace toward the boom town which was springing up from nowhere as the immigrants from the east poured in day after day to the edge of the new lands.

They had decided against holding up any of the wagons in a search for food. Instead, Spade, who had a few gold pieces still on his person, left them toward noon to ride down and attempt to buy something. It was as well, Bull considered, to make no more enemies than was necessary in the embryo community, since it was completely certain that they would make a number.

That was a habit of theirs. So Spade rode down, grumbling. Bull watched him.

"There's probably goin' to be a lot o'

shootin' in that town," he opined, "an' we'll be doin' most of it. But there's only six shots in any six-gun an' we don't want the whole town against us."

"Six shots. . . ." Mike's eyes were contemplatively mild. "Six in my six-gun an' six more in the gun in my shoulder-holster. An' there's a couple in Spade's derringer—that he carries in that plug hat o' his. What d' yuh s'pose the population o' this town is, Bull?"

"Plenty. And if yuh think we're the only bad hombres headin' for the new huntin' ground, yo're just usin' yore brains as usual, Mike," he returned contemptuously.

The razorback top of the hill which they had elected to follow, led them directly to a shady clump of trees just when the sun had got overhead and was beating down its fiercest rays upon the broad plain below them. Still the caravan moved on: only one or two of the wagons dropped out at noon and showed spirals of smoke from behind them to indicate that cooking was going on. Most of the immigrants were hurrying on with the gold fever, as if getting to Custer meant the end of their long race.

Under the trees they awaited Spade; and

presently he returned with a haversack of assorted food. He dumped it.

"I almost shot—once," he confessed. "Them hombres are mighty careful about their food. Think prices are goin' sky-high in Fargo an' Custer."

"And they're right," Bull assented. "The wisest birds in this rush are goin' to sit back an' make money sellin' things while the others dig."

"All but us." Spade grinned a meaning, cold smile across his plate of beans. "We don't sell nor dig."

"We take." Bull fell into the cold beans avidly, and was joined by the others. Coffee simmered in a can over the hastily built fire.

For a long time there was nothing said while the last vestiges of the food brought by Spade disappeared. Meanwhile, the long train of immigrants was passing by, bound north now, toward Custer. Only a few straggled out in the rear. Spade, lying back luxuriously after his meal, eyed them speculatively.

"If we only knew what was inside some o' those covered wagons," he mused, "it'd be

easy to cut one off right now. Most of 'em's gone on ahead."

The afternoon was fading. Bull grunted disapprovingly. "If any of 'em had anything worth stickin' 'em up for, they wouldn't be here," he said. "You hombres ain't never goin' to learn not to do killin' or stick-up work unless it's worth while."

His companions made no reply. They watched idly, stretched at full length on the meager grass, while the tail of the day's long procession plodded by miles below them. There were still a few stragglers. Walking, riding, leading teams, repairing harnesses or wheels . . . there was something of epic scope in even the last few who were plodding by; and though the three felt something of it, it could not be expressed.

Suddenly Mike Costigan, who had stood up to look to the horses, jerked forward with a short exclamation. Spade sat up alertly. Bull only glowered at the smallest of the trio. Mike pointed.

"Horses!" he exclaimed softly. "Not ordinary horses, Bull—they don't put blankets on

ordinary horses when they're runnin'. An' their legs is bound up, too."

"Hell!" muttered Spade. "They're thoroughbreds, Bull!"

Bull got to his feet. With a step amazingly quick and light for one of his powerful bulk, he reached the side of his horse and drew from the saddle a narrow and powerful folding telescope. Pulling it out, he held it to his eye, while the others waited. When he finally put it down, there was a grim smile on his lips.

"Thoroughbreds, all right," he agreed. "Twelve of 'em, attached to that covered wagon." He turned to the others. "Got any idea what speed horses like that are goin' to be worth when the rush starts—an' speed is all that counts?"

Spade's eyes lit up. His right hand fell instinctively on the heavy Colt hanging hidden underneath the tail of the somber black coat he wore. Mike nodded.

"I'll take the driver o' the wagon," he said calmly. "Looks like there's only two men there." His eyes swept the plain. "An' there's no other wagons in sight!"

There were no more words. With their eyes

A William Fox Picture. *Three Bad Men.*

PRESIDENT GRANT SIGNS A TREATY OPENING FOR SETTLEMENT THE LAND FORMERLY OCCUPIED BY THE SIOUX.

fixed purposefully ahead, horses abreast, the three rode silently forward, making for a little knoll where, behind a screen of trees, they could wait in hiding until the lone wagon was just below them.

Meanwhile, the vanguard of the immigrants arriving that day were streaming into Custer. Hordes had turned aside for Fargo. But the newer town was the choice, apparently, of that day's batch. They hurried along the muddy main street, cut up and rutted by the passage of men and vehicles for days on end, past the hastily erected shacks and the board-fronted tents—past, in the center of town, the most pretentious building of all, bearing on its face the legend:

LAYNE HUNTER
"The Palace"

No one in the ever-moving procession failed to look up as they passed the entrance to the big saloon and dance hall. Places of its ilk were familiar; but proprietors like this one whose name stood out over the name of his honky-tonk were curiosities in this raw land.

Layne Hunter sat his horse in front of the entrance, a fastidious, handsome figure, tall and slender and as graceful as a woman, yet with something of steel in his arrogant, careful bearing. His eyes, watching the procession, were ironically amused, mocking; his fine lips were curved in a little smile while his slender, white hands toyed with the Mexican bridle in his fingers. He seemed to have but one look for all—an amused, indulgent look such as Nero must have worn while he watched his masses flee by the thousands from burning Rome.

Behind him, in one of the wide, frame windows opening on the street, crowded the girls who lived in the Palace. From their painted lips and staring, bold eyes, from the cigarette smoke curling from the inviting mouths of most, women turned their children's heads and shot quick, resentful looks as they passed in their wagons. A hard laugh fell from the lips of one of the women and Hunter—like a king who has had his meditations disturbed, turned with a slight frown.

From the group a girl emerged, making toward him. She was younger than the rest, and her gown of calico was in odd contrast to the

low-necked, brief-skirted dresses which the others wore like uniforms of their trade. Her wide, brown eyes were filling with unwilling tears and her hands—like a child's, clutched at Hunter's saddle horn.

He looked down at her musingly. "Well, Millie—?"

She seemed to choke over the words on her lips. "I—I can't, Layne. Don't you see—I can't stay in there—with them!"

Hunter frowned; then, turning slightly, he beheld the watching girls. They were smiling. He smiled, too; but the smile died as his eyes fell on the girl beside him. He bent forward slightly, thoughtfully, and took her chin in his hand. For a moment he studied her tear-wet face, her trembling red lips; but no sign of pity appeared in his eyes.

"Don't be foolish, Millie," he said softly. His voice was gentle, caressing, and he smiled a little, as though to give her confidence. "They won't harm you. I'm here."

"But—Layne!" She shook her head. "I'm not—not like them. You promised—"

He looked quickly about and then shook his head. "I know. But it's only for a while.

Things are upset. I just want you to stay in there till I can find a better place for you, dear." His eyes were liquid, appealing—the eyes of a lover. "You'll bear it just till then, won't you—for me?"

She smiled and wiped away the tears with a little, happy gesture, catching his hand.

"Of course, Layne, if you say it's all right. I'll bear anything for you, dear—"

"That's better." Hunter seemed immensely relieved. As quickly as he could, he withdrew his hand. "Now run along; I'll see you in a minute."

If the girl had any more to say, it was cut short. Along the very edges of the moving throng there dashed at furious speed a single rider. The horse, a white diamond on its forehead, slid to a stop on its haunches and its rider landed on both feet at the same moment. He halted before Hunter, who had already forgotten the girl.

"What's up, Rush?"

The man wiped the perspiration from his forehead and took a quick breath. He caught hold of the embroidered, Mexican coat which the proprietor of the Palace wore and pulled

him down nearer. In a hoarse voice he exclaimed:

"Thoroughbreds! There's a string of 'em—racing thoroughbreds, comin' along only a few miles out, and only two men herdin' 'em. They're way behind the tail end of the train."

Layne Hunter received the news with a perceptible start. His handsome, dark eyes lighted and his white fingers gripped cruelly at the bridle. With a swift look about him, he recovered his impassive poise and glanced toward the door.

"Jeff Millar!"

A sawed-off shotgun emerged through the door before Hunter's lieutenant. In another moment the man stood beside Hunter's white horse. He was bushy of beard and cold of eye—a big, ungainly hulk of a man, with his feet encased in short boots and the shotgun gripped heavily in one hand.

"Thoroughbreds," Hunter said, in a voice so low that none but the two beside him could hear. "Get six or eight men, Jeff, and bring 'em here. Be sure there's no one left at the wagon train to talk."

And with that, smiling gayly, he swung from

his mount even as the two men moved away, and entered the saloon. The girls crowded after him. Outside, the moving stream plodded past, toward the edge of Custer, where the encampment widened the town limits day by day.

CHAPTER V

The afternoon was waning. After they gained the rise, about a hundred feet above the trail which the single covered wagon was following, the three men sat there silently, unmoving, watching the approach. There was but the single vehicle in sight; the others had all passed beyond, and in the west only a faint dust-cloud told of their passing. From a wobbling wheel, Bull could divine the reason for the delay which had caused this wagon to be so far behind the others.

A string of twelve beautiful ponies was attached to the rear. In front of the four horses drawing the wagon, a single rider led the way, holding his seat with an erect, superb carriage and galloping beside the lead horses, obviously hurrying to reach Custer before night came. There was still the river to be forded, farther on.

A more portly individual occupied the seat

and handled the reins of the four horses in front. The thoroughbreds trotted along in the rear at a fresh clip, apparently untrammeled by the checkered blankets over their backs. Their white-bandaged legs flashed in rhythmic unison. The eyes of Bull Stanley, lover of good horseflesh, lighted with admiration.

"Too bad," he muttered, scarcely parting his thin lips, "—too bad to have to kill folks that keep good horses like that."

Mike looked at him uncomprehendingly. Spade only smiled his ironical smile and glanced down at the long-barreled forty-five which he rested across his saddle horn. Mike slowly drew his own weapon and spun the cylinder.

Bull, observing the preparations, nodded in reply to his own comment and reached back for his gun.

"All ready?"

The wagon was very near now. They could not make out the face of the lone rider, but the driver of the four horses had removed a black sombrero and his silvery white hair could be seen plainly. He was rather portly, too; not, thought Bull, a particularly dangerous type in

a fight. He had his eyes, narrowed now, on the slender, rapier-like figure of the out-rider.

Suddenly Mike gave a curse. He jerked upright in his saddle. Bull whipped the spyglass up to his eye. Spade's lined features grew more impassive than ever as he stared in silence. In that same second, the two guarding the horses saw—!

Out of a string of brush which followed the bank of the river where it turned south of the trail, six horsemen suddenly emerged. They were goading on their mounts with whip and spur, whooping furiously, and the lowering sun glinted on rifle and pistol barrels. Straight on for the prairie schooner they came, spreading out in fan-shaped formation as they approached.

The team of four hesitated in its stride; there was a startled, high-voiced cry which the three watchers on the hill could hear plainly. Then the whip curled out from the driver's seat and the wagon plunged on toward the river.

But the horse thieves were riding at twice the speed that the heavy vehicle could make. Two men at the extreme left of their line dove forward and cut off retreat in that direction. In

the same instant, the man in the seat brought out a long rifle and fired.

There was an answering crack from the marauders, and then the pistol of the lone rider spoke. Simultaneously, as a sheet of flame swept from the fan-shaped group, the rifle in the wagon jetted flame again. One of the horses, driving for the vehicle at full speed, came to a dead stop and its rider tumbled to the ground.

He was up again in a second, however, recovering his rifle, while his companions bore on. His weapon spoke—twice!

There was a cry. The lead horse of the team staggered and fell, entangling the others, and the wagon came to a halt. In response to another burst of flame, the man in the seat threw up his hands; his rifle fell and he followed it to the ground.

Bull uttered an oath. Mike Costigan was staring disbelievingly out of his innocent round eyes.

"Can yuh beat that fer gall?" he exclaimed. "Bull, they're stealin' *our* horses!"

Bull's face was deadly. He glanced from

Mike to the third of their group and picked up his reins.

"Come on!"

That was all. With a leap, the three horses dove from the shelter of the bushes and plunged down the hill. Bridles were forgotten; the outlaws guided with their knees and went straight on, their pistols ready in accustomed fingers.

The survivor of the two herders was kneeling over the figure of the portly man who had been driving, courageously pumping the last few charges out of the repeating rifle he had let fall. On swept the six horse thieves—until, within a hundred yards of the halted wagon, the first of them caught sight of the three bearing down the hillside. He gave a shout. The others halted in their stride.

"Let it go!"

It was Bull's voice, calm, deadly, merciless. Three shots came as one. The first of the marauders fell, pitching headlong from his horse. A second dropped sidewise and his frightened animal darted off, dragging the rider by the stirrups.

There was something of fierce, deadly cer-

tainty in the oncoming sweep of the three outcasts. Never once did their terrific gallop swerve or hesitate; they made straight for the remainder of the horse thieves where they had halted in indecision.

Two shots came, uncertain. Bull brought up his pistol and fired again. Then suddenly, in abrupt, unreasoning panic, the remaining trio turned and fled at top speed in the direction from which they had come.

Bull rode beyond his companions, looking after them. They had stopped to pick up the first of their comrades, who was clinging weakly to the rear of one of the retreating mounts. The outlaw's face held a grim, unrelenting smile. But it was of no use to pursue. They did not want blood. They wanted the horses.

Slowly he wheeled and came back to where Spade and Mike Costigan had halted. They were standing uncertainly, looking down at the silent figure of the man in a frock coat who had been driving the team. Above him kneeled his companion, the rifle discarded, everything else but that still figure on the ground forgotten. Bull watched grimly as the wide, soft sombrero was bent low in grief over the dead man.

There was a mute question in Mike's eyes when he turned. Bull understood. What were they to do about this lone survivor? Spade had already dismounted. He was moving toward where the string of thoroughbreds stood stamping at the dust in the rear. Mike shifted uncertainly.

But to Bull there was no question. Survivors know too much; and beside, he wanted the horses. Dismounting easily, he took three quick steps forward until he was standing over the bent, heedless figure that pillowed the dead man's head. Spade was watching him now, too.

Bull drew his gun, still warm from the recent firing. Better to get it over with at once. He didn't like to look into a man's eyes before he killed, particularly the eyes of an unarmed man—and he had no intention of giving this one an even break. The fellow was simply in the way and must be dispatched expeditiously.

The heavy gun was against the sombrero. Bull's finger was on the trigger; the eyes of his two companions were on him, waiting for the moment when they could go on with their work—when something made Bull pause. A

white, slender hand reached upward for the brim of the hat. It came off—and Bull gasped!

A cascade of gleaming black hair was released with the movement. It fell down the back of the kneeling figure. A face, tear-wet and strained, was turned slightly. Bull was gazing into the deep, liquid eyes of a girl!

He swore, softly, and the exclamation was repeated from the lips of his companions. The Three stood still, riveted where they were, staring. It was instinct which made Bull lower his pistol—instinct, and something which he glimpsed far in the depths of those wide eyes looking up into his: eyes of a child and a woman at once.

There was something of natural trust which struck at a chord inside Bull. He recognized the slim figure now as she got to her feet, two big tears like the most priceless of pearls, at the end of her long, curving lashes. It was she, in men's clothes, who had been riding beside the team. But it was not her beauty which struck Bull like a blow, startling and vivid though that was. He suddenly remembered . . . voices, scenes, crowded his benumbed brain. Memory gripped him, held him

enthralled, unmoving, while the girl, like a child who has lost its parents, let her dark head rest against his shoulder.

She was tiny, smaller than she had seemed in the saddle. She had to reach up to grasp his shirt at the throat with groping, helpless fingers. He stared down at her hand dully. She was sobbing—softly, not hysterically, as sophisticated women cry, but gently, unwillingly, like a child.

Bull became aware of the pistol in his hand, of the stares of his two silent partners. He looked about sheepishly. Mike Costigan was nearest. He raised the pistol and tossed it to him. Mike caught it wonderingly and pushed it into his belt.

Slowly the girl looked up, her eyes still wet. Bull saw her trembling red lips and had an instant realization of how wondrously beautiful she was, like a rare, gorgeous flower in this wilderness of harsh and crude things. She seemed to see none of the cruelty, the ruthlessness of his features. She tried to smile.

"I—I'm grateful," she said, in a soft little voice. She turned to the still figure by the wagon wheel. "He—he was my father." She

looked up at Bull as though he would understand without further words her grief.

He nodded, increasingly conscious of Spade Allen's ironic smile and Mike Costigan's wondering, disbelieving stare. "It's too bad," he managed.

"You're very good," she faltered. "You and your friends. And very brave. I'm Lee Carleton—from Virginia."

"Pleased to meet yuh." Bull was embarrassed. He nodded again. "He's plumb dead, I reckon."

"Yes." She closed her eyes; and then, a moment later, shook her head and tried to smile again. "Father and I were heading for Custer with these horses. They're thoroughbreds, our own breed. We thought we might sell them there and then go into the Dakotas."

Bull nodded again. "They're good horses," he agreed.

Then he turned. Spade had evidently tired of waiting. He was unloosing the thoroughbreds from where they were attached to the wagon. Mike went to join him. Bull's eyes blazed. He stopped Spade in his tracks with

a fierce bellow, and the two stood staring at him.

"Put those horses back!"

For a moment they failed to understand. Then they saw the look on Bull's face, met his eyes, and looked at each other. Mike Costigan shook his head.

"Reckon he means it, Spade." Reluctantly he moved to obey.

Bull turned from them back to the trusting head on his shoulder. He reached up awkwardly and let his heavy hand fall gently on the gleaming black hair, and shot a glance at the still figure of Carleton, where it lay on the ground.

"Lot o' folks die out thisaway," he mused. "Reckon we better do the best we can for—for him, Miss. Then we'll see that yuh get safe into Custer. This is bad country for a little lady—alone."

His eyes clouded as he spoke; a swift memory lighted a sudden pain in their depths. The others had come up and he turned to them more harshly than usual.

"We've just decided," he said coolly, "to see that the little lady gits safe into camp."

Spade Allen shot him a swift, wondering glance. Mike shifted the tobacco from one side of his jaw to the other and blinked thoughtfully.

"'Course," he agreed. "This is right bad country for a girl—and most anybody hereabouts'd be liable to try an' steal them horses!"

CHAPTER VI

It was just morning when the prairie schooner lurched across the ford in the Red River. It had encamped on the eastern bank for the night. Bull had decided, as darkness fell, that they had best not attempt to reach the camp until the next day.

The crossing was made easily. Lee Carleton, sitting in the driver's seat, cast a last, querulous look backward when the big vehicle reached the top of the hill on the farther side and made ready to start downward to where the trail just crossed would be hidden from view. The little mound marking the place where the attack had been made was out of sight. The girl's eyes were dry. The tiniest sigh escaped her parted lips as she turned to Bull.

The outlaw rode his mount beside the seat, his eyes fixed ahead. Even to the girl he had spoken but seldom after that fresh-turned earth had fallen at last into place. Behind the wagon, Spade and Mike Costigan rode at either side

of the trotting thoroughbreds. As the hump of the hill fell behind, Bull looked up, to find the girl's eyes on him.

A mute glance passed between them. There was something hungry in Bull's fierce eyes; but in Lee Carleton's there was only trust and gratitude. He dropped his head with more humility than he had ever known.

"You'll be all right," he grunted, meaninglessly. "Reckon Custer can't be such a bad town as people say."

She smiled. "I'm not afraid," she said, and cast a glance backward at the two riding grimly along with the horses. "I'll feel like a princess, riding into town with an escort like this. Bull"—he raised his head at her questioning voice—"Bull, have you ever been afraid—of anything?"

He frowned. "Not that I know of, Miss."

"Why not?"

Bull rubbed his chin in embarrassment. "I don't know—exactly. Reckon it must be because I'm pretty sure how my guns work."

"Oh." It was Lee's turn to frown, which she did charmingly. "Shooting is—horrible, I think. Have you ever killed a man, Bull?"

He looked up startled. Somehow, he did not want to answer her. Somehow, in spite of everything, he did not want this girl to realize his past. It was too black, and she was too pure, too innocent and sweet. He made a mental note to get her out of this country as soon as possible, if he could. It was she who relieved him of the necessity for replying, however.

"In self-defense, I suppose," she mused. "One can't be blamed for that. And if you hadn't shot yesterday, I don't know where I'd be. But that isn't murder."

She considered the question thoughtfully, her eyes on the horizon. Bull looked up at her. Murder! Until yesterday, he hadn't even given it a name. It had been merely a case of the survival of the fittest. Now—he turned and shot a black look at his companions—a look which Mike, in the act of taking a peaceable bite from his newly acquired plug of tobacco, was unable to account for.

It was the girl herself who broke the silence with a little cry as she stood up on the footboard. She was pointing.

"Look!" she cried. "There it is! Bull, isn't that Custer?"

Bull stood up in his stirrups and shaded his eyes. At the end of the flat roadway over which they were progressing, marked by the passage of thousands of feet, he made out a collection of olive spots, the occasional gleam of tin, the dust and thin smoke-spirals arising from a congregation of humans. Mike Costigan spurred up interestedly.

"That's Custer," Bull agreed. "We'll be in town in another half hour."

His harsh features froze again as he went on; his eyes took on their challenging, stony stare. Somewhere in Custer were the men who had raided the Carleton horses the day before; he was sure of that. And he wanted to see them. He remembered one horse which had ridden off—a black, with a diamond in its forehead and a patch of white on its flank. The raid spoke well for the lawlessness of the town ahead; he looked up at the girl's eager eyes and flushed face, and frowned to himself.

They continued on.

Then, suddenly, they were in the outskirts of the new town. It was a scene of furious

activity, of active hammers and shouting, strident voices, of horses and mules and oxen, of barking dogs and loud-voiced, anxious women, flushed, excited faces, eager cries—all, to Bull, part of the excitement of a boom. Tents sufficed for living quarters, where they were procurable; but for the most part, the immigrants had backed up their covered wagons, tethered the horses behind them, and used their interiors for homes until the hour came for the rush across the opened territory.

Everything was hasty, raw, unstable. It was as though even the inanimate objects knew that this was but a temporary rest. In a few days, it would be noon of the twenty-fifth; the cannon would sound the release, and the rush across the line would begin, into the newly acquired territory, across the open, fertile fields, to where the gold lay for the taking.

The main street was a rutted bog, deep worn by the hoofs of beasts and the wheels of the carts and wagons. Stores had sprung up like toadstools, overnight. Honky-tonks flaunted brazen invitations, and already every one of the flourishing, hastily erected saloons on the main street had imported painted women who

came from nowhere at the lure of the cry of "Gold!"

Saloons were distinctly in the majority. The postoffice occupied part of a general store. Lee smiled infectiously at a sign hastily painted on the board front of a large tent:

JOE MINSK

Clothes and Furnishings

"Civilization is coming!" she laughed. The proprietor, a little, check-suited man with friendly eyes, caught her smile and grinned in return. They progressed on down the street.

A water-trough seemed to mark the center of town. It was here that the most imposing structure of all stood, too—Layne Hunter's Palace. Bull glanced up at the bold lettering of the sign overhead and his eyes narrowed. Lee pulled in the horses before the trough. A large crowd milled about, apparently aimlessly. They thronged in and out of the busy saloon doorway. From inside, came the blatant strains of music and the voices of men and women—a strident laugh.

"Reckon we'll hit for the farther end of town," Bull decided, as he picked up the tin dipper beside the trough. The horses were already nuzzling over. A smaller stream of water ran out above the trough, for drinking purposes. He held the dipper under it as Lee dismounted and his two companions, riding up, followed suit.

An eager crowd looked on at the late arrivals. Sullenly Bull answered the numerous questions put to him regarding their delay. He did not mention the raid on the wagon until a stout, broad-shouldered individual with puffy cheeks, a bibulous pink nose and a general air of florid dignity and importance shouldered his way through a crowd that made respectful room for him.

"I'm Zach Lillie," he announced, and swept a low, stiff-crowned hat from his waving white hair. "Zach Lillie," he went on, and waited for that information to become assimilated.

Bull straightened with insolent carelessness. "Is that so?" he asked. "What about it?"

"Zach Lillie," the other returned, in a slightly louder voice. "Editor, printer, reporter and proprietor of the Custer Daily Bugle—'the

paper that reaches to the farthest frontier and keeps pace with the march of pioneers.' Also I'm a lawyer and educator, too. But right now I'm a reporter. I came to find out what held y' up. If it's news, I'll guarantee y' an extra right now."

Lee smiled. But Bull did not appear to be amused. He shot a swift glance at his companions and then moved closer to the old man.

"I'll give yuh news," he said quietly, "but I want some first. Know anybody in this town ridin' a horse with a diamond in his forehead an' a white spot on the flank? Black?"

Zach Lillie stared; then, inadvertently, he looked over his shoulder in the direction of the entrance to the Palace. A little group stood in the doorway. With mildly amused, supercilious eyes, Layne Hunter leaned there gracefully, toying with the heavy, ornate butt of a riding whip in his fingers. Zach had begun to shake his head, when some one in the crowd, pushing forward, said—

"That hoss? It's one o' Hunter's gang—two or three o' his men ride him."

"Hunter's gang!" Bull glanced up at the sign overhead and then at the smiling, hand-

some face in the doorway. His jaw tightened and his eyes were more deadly than ever. His right hand felt for his pistol and he was conscious that Spade and Mike were edging closer, silently. A hand fell on his arm and he whirled to face Lee Carleton's pleading eyes.

"Don't, Bull!" she whispered. "Please don't start trouble now. It—it couldn't bring father back, anyway, and I couldn't bear to see any more shooting."

Bull glanced again toward the doorway; reluctantly, however, his hand dropped from his gun-belt. He nodded and turned to where the editor of the Custer Daily Bugle still waited. Then, making sure that he could be distinctly heard even at the edges of the crowd, he said.

"Yes—there's news. Miss Carleton here, was held up on the trail by a gang o' horse thieves. They killed her father. And one of 'em"—here he paused carefully—"one of 'em rode a black horse with a white diamond on his head and a white mark on his flank!"

There was a curse somewhere in the crowd; a low murmur of indignation. Bull turned contemptuously away as Zach Lillie bustled off. The tin dipper was still in his hand. Refilling

it, he handed it to the girl and then, paying no more attention to the crowd, swung upon his companions.

"No shootin'," he announced, "until it's got t' be done. The lady don't approve o' careless shootin'.

Spade nodded silently. Mike Costigan shifted his quid before he spoke.

"This here boom is sure gettin' to be a nice family tea-party," he mused. "Spade, yuh better get rid o' those cards an' buy a new checkerboard. Then we can— Say, Bull, who's the leadin' man?"

CHAPTER VII

Bull whirled, scowling. The big muscles in his heavy arms and shoulders tightened with the same instinct which raises a cat's fur at sight of an hereditary enemy. For a second, while Spade and Mike turned mutely from the scene before them, to him, he stood there silent, unmoving.

Layne Hunter had parted a way through the crowd which had gathered to witness the arrival of the Carleton thoroughbreds. Behind him, smiling grimly, the sawed-off shotgun across his arm, Jeff Millar lingered, truculent, expectant. The crowd in the doorway had edged forward and one or two of them were near Millar; the rest were smiling broadly.

Bull had no need to ask the name of the man. Hunter's very attitude bespoke his confidence in his position and the waiting guns behind him. Bull's glance swept in a swift, searching survey from the tip of the wide, white sombrero which sat at a rakish angle on

Hunter's sleek head, to the tips of his polished Mexican boots and silver spurs. A typical dandy of the frontier, and yet not a part of the frontier, Hunter's were the graces of the drawing-room combined with the stealthy craft of an underworld which makes use of henchmen for the cruder issues.

Hunter's white, carefully manicured fingers touched with a gentle pressure the wrist of Lee Carleton as she raised the tin dipper toward her lips. Startled, she turned and looked at him. He was smiling. It was this scene that met Bull's eyes. Something held him unmoving for a moment.

"Forgive me!" It was Hunter's suave, cool voice. "For such lips—a silver cup."

Without more ado, he slipped the dipper from her fingers, and drawing a folding cup from the silk sash about his waist, held it under the stream of water. Lee watched in staring surprise as he turned and presented it.

"I am Layne Hunter. Permit me—!"

Lee took a step backward. She had not yet overcome her first surprise. The smooth, pleasant voice of the man, his clothes and bearing, his handsome, almost classic features and dark

eyes—everything was so incongruous in this setting, that for a moment she could only stare. Hunter held the cup he had filled near her lips.

"Please—!"

There was a low laugh from behind him. In that same instant, too, there was another sound—a smothered curse and a roar from Bull Stanley as he sprang forward. For a second no one knew what had happened. Bull never touched his gun. In the same fierce leap which carried him between the girl and the proprietor of the Palace, his fist had come up; and as Hunter, startled at the fury of his attack, fell backward, the cup was dashed from his hand. It flew into the crowd.

Bull faced him, his thumbs just stuck in his loose gun-belt. His lips barely parted when he spoke.

"This lady is in my company, *amigo,*" Bull muttered in his low, deadly voice. "If there's anything she needs, I'll see that she gets it. *Sabe?*"

"You—!"

For an instant, Hunter's pale features were contorted into a mask of fury. His fists clenched and he made an inadvertent move toward his

sash. Millar stepped forward and his shotgun moved ominously. Mike Costigan grinned hopefully, his fingers stealing toward the butt of his revolver; and Spade Allen, his features graven as a mask, took three sliding steps forward until he was just at Millar's elbow.

Then suddenly, his eyes on Bull's face, Hunter took a backward step and broke into a jeering laugh. There was no mirth in the sound. He shook his head commiseratingly.

"Well, well, to think that I could have forgotten!" he cried. "If it isn't old Bull Stanley —'the Black Devil himself!'—playing the knight errant. Stanley, my compliments—I've seen your face on so many reward posters that I don't think I'll ever forget it."

The face of which he spoke was far from pleasant at that moment. It is possible Hunter would never know how near his words brought him to his doom. For the briefest second a flame lighted deep in Bull's eyes; then it died, and he shifted sidewise, glancing toward Lee.

She was staring at him, disbelieving, as though she had not heard aright. The crowd was motionless. But Bull said nothing. Hunter, however, had not finished his work. He had not

been unaware of Mike's grinning move forward, nor of Spade Allen's slide. Now he swung upon the smallest member of the trio.

"—And Mike Costigan!—'The Python!' Last time I heard from you, Mike, you were in the very devil of a hurry. So that sheriff didn't get you either, eh?"

Mike's hand was on the butt of his gun. Only Bull's warning, deadly eyes kept him from drawing. He looked dubiously toward the girl. Now she was staring at him, with that same mute disbelief.

"As for you, Spade Allen—!" The silence was broken again by Hunter's voice, raised to a higher pitch now, so that the crowd could hear, and it had lost its drawing contemptuousness in a sharper note. "There's enough crooked gamblers in this town already, Spade. That old three-card game isn't going to go here—particularly after I get to be sheriff!"

At the last words, a strangled cheer arose from the outskirts of the crowd. Hunter smiled. The three bad men stood motionless. The proprietor of the Palace, smiling confidently again, turned back to Lee.

"You are to be congratulated, Miss, on your choice of bodyguard."

A silence fell again. Hunter leaned easily against the post behind him. Lee Carleton's eyes fell upon one after the other of the three. Bull was last. But in his steady gaze she read no denial. No denial was necessary. Suddenly she seemed to know that it was all true, every word.

Bull took a deep breath, glancing at Hunter, when she did not speak, and recovered the fallen dipper. With hands that were not quite steady, he held it under the small stream until it was full. Then, turning, he offered it to her without a word.

Across the battered cup her eyes met his. She hesitated. The cup was a symbol, she knew, and in his eyes—naked a moment before with the light of the killer, steady and grave now—was a mute, unspoken plea for confidence.

Lee smiled. Hunter's lips twisted malevolently as she reached out her hand and took the cup.

"Thank you, Bull," she said in a soft, gentle voice.

Something strange and hitherto unknown lighted deep inside Bull's breast at the whispered words and the smile. He took a deep breath and his grim, cruel lips twisted unaccustomedly. Turning upon Hunter, he shot him a swift, contemptuous glance, and then his eyes met those of his companions.

The same look was reflected there. Mike was grinning. Spade's thin lips were twisted and his eyes were alight. He nodded.

"Let's get goin', boys," said Bull softly. "Miss Lee's got a lot o' work to get done before night."

Bull tethered his own mount in the rear of the wagon and leapt up beside the girl in the seat, taking the reins himself. As he was about to start, Millar took a step forward and thrust a square of cheap paper, on which the ink was not yet dry, toward him.

"Read it over on yore way, pardner," he grinned.

Bull accepted it without a word. As the crowd parted and the cortege got under way, he flung it open. A grim smile curved his lips as he read the staring lines:

Tonight!

Vote for

Law and Order

and

Layne Hunter

For Sheriff—

Voting Booths—At Hunter's Pleasure Palace
(Printed by Zach Lillie—The Bugle Press.)

Slowly the paper crumpled in Bull's big hand. He turned sidewise to find Lee watching him. She had read, too.

"Is that man—that man down by the trough—is he Layne Hunter?" she asked.

Bull nodded. "Yes."

That was all. He might have gone on. He knew Hunter; he had met him but once before, but the man's reputation was like an unpleasant odor. Originally from the Panhandle section of Texas, Bull and the fastidious dandy of the Palace hailed from the same state.

Bull, however, was not a conversationalist. Lee had seen the men; she could form her own

opinions. What he knew of Hunter, of the latter's sleek appearance in the very town from which Bull had come—of his crookedness and vice—those things were not particularly interesting to Lee. The same town which had seen Hunter now reviled the name of Jim Stanley.

There was little choice, the gunman reflected, between him and the owner of the Palace. It would have gained nothing to throw in Hunter's teeth knowledge equal to what the other had shown of him. Recriminations were not in Bull's line.

He was a fighter, a gunman—he had even been a bandit, and the three notches in the heavy forty-five at his hip had not all been the result of self-defense. Many crimes were chalked against him, from the Rio Grande to Hudson's Bay; but he had stood eye to eye with his men and his victims; he had never asked for mercy any more than he had expected to extend it. If he had killed men, he had taken an equal chance of being killed in return, which was not Hunter's way.

That was why, in spite of all, Bull could still afford contempt for the man who had exposed himself a few moments before. Hunter used

women, for his toys and decoys; he used men less brainy than himself, less crafty, where there was fighting to be done with men.

The wagon had reached the end of the main street and turned westward, rounding a group of vehicles similar to it and a street that was already in the making, before Bull halted. He flung the reins over the flanks of the tired animals and surveyed the cleared space between one huge tent and another wagon.

"Reckon this'd make as good a place as any to camp," he decided. Lee agreed. The two men came riding up from the rear.

"Park them horses," Bull ordered, and got down from the seat. Spade was watching him; there was trouble in Bull's eye, a frown creasing his forehead. Mike hunched himself closer. They waited. Bull looked from one to the other with contempt and threw down the crumpled ball of paper he still held in his hand.

"Layne Hunter's goin' to be elected sheriff o' this town," he said quietly. "Make sure yore guns is slippin' easy in their holsters." Then he turned away.

CHAPTER VIII

By the middle of the afternoon the Carleton camp was ready. Instead of facing the open roadway as the other wagons did, Lee's sheltered vehicle had been backed about until it was well in from the line of fronts which was slowly and certainly forming a street. Facing the street, however, between it and the wagon, Bull and his two companions had thrown up a tent for themselves. Lee occupied the wagon, which was spacious and roomy; and once the supplies encumbering it inside were cleared out, she began to arrange a rather attractive retreat.

Between the wagon and the tent there was not a great deal of space; Mike's rudely constructed fireplace squatted there, and the rest of the ground was taken up with water buckets and the miscellaneous paraphernalia of the camp. Beyond the wagon, attached to its forward end, all the horses were picketed.

Lee was joyous when the camp was finally

complete. During the bustle of the day, she had been able to submerge her grief at the tragedy of the night before. The lonely grave was far behind her now. In this new world, there was a strange unreality to that other she had known; it was as if at dusk of the night before her last connection with the old life had been severed for once and all.

This was what helped most—this and youth. She would never forget her father; but her loneliness was dispelled in a deep, unconscious confidence in the three men who had come to her out of the wild prairie. Bull Stanley had watched her pallid face brighten during the day, and his own harsh features had lost some of their grimness each time he looked at her.

One of the harness traces had to be repaired. Bull squatted at the rear of his tent, working over it. From time to time he looked up at the entrance to the wagon. Lee was inside, sleeping: she had rested but little the night before, scarcely ten miles from the lonely grave.

How much did she guess, he wondered, of their past? Hunter had said enough that day, and their silence had confirmed it. But what

did she think?—had her mute acceptance of them been born merely of gratitude, and was she anxious now that they leave as soon as possible?

Leave—?

Bull jerked up with the thought. He had never stopped to think of that, since her dark head had rested against his breast the afternoon before. He had simply gone on; each moment had made its demands. There had been no time for speculation.

Now the thought struck him like a blow. Inadvertently he glanced up in the direction of Hunter's Palace. Leave her alone here, among these men—with Hunter? Lawlessness—the stalking terror of the boom towns—was due in Custer in all its savage ferocity within the next twenty-four hours. Hadn't the Three come here for that reason?

Alone and friendless here. . . . Bull shook his head and grunted deep in his throat. Whatever Mike and Spade had to say about it, they were staying.

His two familiars were not present, however, for consultation. Once the temporary camp had been straightened and the noon meal eaten,

they had announced their intention of looking over the sights of the town. Bull had been aware of their licking, thirsty lips when they stood in front of the Palace. Before they left, he fixed them with a stern look. But as Lee had been present, he had been unable to voice his usual threat of dire consequences should they get drunk.

At that moment, however, getting drunk was the consummation most devoutly in the minds of the two bad men. Zach Lillie's Bugle, a new edition tearing down the streets as they emerged from the tent, had announced the erection of three new saloons that day. The editor confirmed the announcement with his own personal verification. Mike spied the first before they reached the place where the new road turned into the main street.

"The Broadway Café." He stopped and looked up at the bold red lettering of the fresh sign, then from it to Spade. The gambler nodded gravely.

They marched inside.

It was nearly an hour before they emerged. Mike was wearing a smile but Spade's lined face was more serious, more dangerous than

ever. Wordless, they marched side by side up the main street. Mike's eyes were fixed on the Palace.

"I'm headin' there," he announced. "Maybe that hombre Hunter's liable to pull a gun."

Spade suddenly halted. He was silent, staring at a new sign nailed to the ridge-pole of a huge tent just beside them. Mike followed his gaze, blinked, and read:

MELVILLE

Monte or Poker—Sky Limit.

Mike looked back to his companion. His worn old face wore a lugubrious look. Spade still stared at the sign, ruminating. At last he faced Mike.

"D'yuh s'pose, Mike—d'yuh s'pose he really means that?"

Mike shook his head. "Reckon he's got tuh, in this country, Spade. Reckon he'd have tuh shoot pretty fast if he went back on it."

Spade nodded thoughtfully. "It's a nice sign," he decided. "*Vamos!*—I'm goin' tuh see how much it means."

It was late afternoon when Mike Costigan emerged from the Palace. His gun was unused. Hunter and his men had had their eyes on him while he stood at the bar but they had made no move. Zach Lillie, his corpulent little body held up by the durable rail, had stood beside the bad man and regaled him with a brief history of the new town. Mike took a tearful leave of him.

"Better vote for Hunter to-night," the old publisher said, catching his companion's sleeve and pulling him close at parting. "He'll be elected, stranger, and it's going to be Hell for those against him."

Mike nodded gravely—he was an oddly harmless-looking individual as he stood there blinking across the room at the proprietor of the saloon. He made no reply, however, and a moment later, weaved his way steadily through the wide doorway. There was a momentary thought of Bull Stanley. The big gunfighter would be angry, as he always was when Mike got drunk. But that, Mike told himself, was ridiculous. He wasn't drunk. Hadn't he spent the afternoon in serious conversation with the most erudite individual in Custer?

Suddenly, on his way along the main street he stopped dead in his tracks. Melville's sign was just in front of him, that freshly painted sign which had so intrigued Spade a couple of hours before. Spade was there, too, and Melville himself. The latter was a frock-coated individual wearing a wide-brimmed black sombrero.

Mike stared. The owner of the gambling tent, his hatchet face long and rueful, was engaged in taking down the new sign which announced: "Sky Limit." Standing scarcely two paces away, Spade was gravely counting a thick roll of bills, while from his little finger a buckskin bag hung bulging with gold pieces. As Mike came up, the gambler turned upon Melville seriously.

"I don't reckon I want the tent," he said quietly. "We got a pretty good one, and you might want tuh start again. *Adios!*"

He turned up the street. Mike hurried past the forlorn figure of Melville, staring after him, and caught up. He looked at Spade significantly. Spade glanced up and nodded.

"That sign meant what it said, all right,"

he sighed. "Mike, I'm sure comin' to like this town."

They reached their tent. Bull was not inside, and Mike parted the rear flap. Spade joined in, and they emerged into the clearing behind. Lee Carleton stood at the entrance to her wagon-boudoir, and Bull shifted uncertainly just below her, the mended trace in his hands. It was growing dusk.

"Things are wonderful here now, Bull," they heard the girl say, a trace of hesitation in her voice. "I suppose"—she faltered—"I suppose you gentlemen have your own business to take care of now. . . ."

Mike looked at Spade and the look was returned. There was no need for speech. Together they moved forward and joined Bull. He shot them a quick look and turned away.

"To tell the truth, Miss Lee," he said slowly, "we ain't exactly—uh, rushed for business right now." He swung fiercely upon his companions. "Are we?"

Mike and Spade shook their heads vociferously. "Not at all," Spade agreed.

"Then you mean—you're all free for the present?" Lee looked from one to the other.

Bull nodded agreement and the others followed suit.

The relief that shone in Lee's face was replaced by a slight frown. Spade's fingers were still fondling the roll of bills he had acquired.

"I—I'm afraid I can't pay you any wages, though," she said. "I'd like to ask you all to stay with me, but"—she hesitated—"for a little while, money won't exactly be flowing—"

Bull grunted. "Nobody ain't said nothin' about wages, Miss," he averred. He turned quickly upon Spade and grasped the bills. "Y' see, we've got plenty, for the present—plenty for you and us. For the rest, we'll take our chances when we strike it."

Lee's face brightened. Her eyes shone with a misty light as she swept the circle of men. "You mean it?"

Three heads nodded as one. The girl smiled.

"I suppose it's settled, then," she said. She hesitated, looking from one to the other, like a princess surveying her guard of honor. "Then," she added softly, "—then—now you are all *my* men!"

Her men!

Some quality in her voice struck deep. Bull

was nodding slowly; Spade had permitted his cruel features to relax into what was almost a smile. Mike muttered, "Yes'm," and turned away, blowing his nose violently. The others watched him suspiciously.

When Lee had gone inside, Bull stood there alone for a long moment, staring at nothing. Memory made steely blanks of his hard eyes. His lips parted.

"Millie. . . ."

Spade, who stood a few feet away watching him, heard the whisper. "The name, Bull—is Lee," he said coolly.

Bull swung upon him with a fierce oath. "Who told you to stand around here?" he demanded. "Get back into the tent—we've got work to do, now we're hired!"

A William Fox Picture. *Three Bad Men.*

GOVERNMENT SCOUTS INDICATE THE LIMITATIONS OF THE NEW LAND GRANT.

CHAPTER IX

It was Bull's turn to wander about the town that evening. He had warned Lee that she must neither ride alone nor leave their camp; and to his two familiars he gave stern instructions to remain near the tent until he returned. He feared nothing in particular, unless it was Hunter; but he knew the spirit pervading Custer that night.

It was the night of election. Bull had found out who occupied the wagon and tent on the lot adjoining theirs. It was Eric Jonson, the young New Englander who had given him the first information of the rush on the day preceding.

"Who's up for election besides Hunter?" Bull demanded.

Jonson frowned. "Might as well say nobody," he returned. "There's Ben Harman. Ben's a good man, but that don't mean nothin'. Hunter's gang's too strong. You vote pretty near at the muzzle of their guns."

Bull nodded. "I noticed where the election

was takin' place," he agreed. He faced Jonson. "Well, I'm goin' down to vote—for Harman. I don't know him, but I do know Hunter. Comin'?"

Jonson looked up at the dangerous, cruel features, swept the powerful bulk of the stranger with cool eyes—saw the butt of the forty-five ready at his hip.

"You're votin' for—Harman?" he asked.

"That's what I said." Bull was at best not a pleasant conversationalist.

Jonson nodded. "Everybody thought you'd be linin' up with Hunter's gang, soon as you got to know the town. That's what your reputation indicated."

Bull fixed him with an angry look. "I said I was votin' for Harman," he said softly. "You comin' down?"

Jonson hesitated. "Reckon I am," he said. "Besides us, I guess Ben'll get about two votes."

"I'm sendin' two more down, as soon as I'm through," Bull grunted. "Come on."

The main street was alive with people. Torch-flares, darting to and fro, gave it a weirdly savage appearance. Above the collection of

shacks in the valley, a star-studded sky pressed down with all the peace of the ages—in vivid, awesome contrast with the riot of the streets. Two guns went off somewhere; there was a scream, and on its heels a high-pitched laugh—a woman's, from the direction of the Palace.

About the entrance to this place, most of the crowd was milling. Bull hesitated at the fringe of it. There was a curse. He saw a tall, ungainly man swing about and whisper hoarsely to a smaller individual next to him.

"One's accounted for. Get a line on anybody else who's agin Hunter."

Bull's dangerous eyes narrowed. White-faced, young Jonson followed close on his heels as Bull pressed forward until he stood eye to eye with the man who had spoken.

"Yuh won't have t' look far for the next one, *amigo,*" he purred. "I'm votin' for Harman—what about it?"

His right hand rested easily in his gun-belt; the palm was a scant inch from the weapon's butt. The man's eyes blazed—but there was something in Bull's face which made him hesitate. Some one in the crowd voiced a half-hearted cheer but Bull paid no attention.

"What about it?" he repeated.

The fellow took an inadvertent step backward. "Bull Stanley, huh? An' still lookin' for trouble! Go ahead an' vote for Harman—when Hunter's sheriff, there ain't goin' tuh be much room in this town for yore kind, Bull!"

Bull's voice was low, soft with menace. "I make my own room, pardner," he said. "Hunter or Harman—but be sure you ain't blockin' my way when I begin t' crave space!"

"Good man!" came the hysterical voice of a middle-aged woman as Bull turned contemptuously away.

Jonson was still at his heels. One or two of the bolder in the crowd followed the gunman as he entered the saloon, announcing their intent to vote as he voted.

The interior of the Palace was crowded to the doors with an excited, shifting crowd. Drinks were passing over the bar by the score. Amid all the confusion, the loud-voiced men and painted women, Layne Hunter moved smiling to and fro, caressing the butt of his riding whip, watching the voting go on.

Bull walked steadily across the floor, ignoring those he shoved from his path, followed by

his little cortege, to where three men sat behind a rough board table in the corner under the stairs which led up to a balcony surrounding the barroom. Though the noise in the big room could not be hushed, there was a silence in that corner when the gunmen strode up. He waited for one man to finish signing his name, and then stopped before the table.

It was Zach Lillie, in charge of the voting, who looked up. Hunter sidled closer, still smiling.

"Stanley—what's the first name, sir?" Lillie's slightly quavering voice betokened his dread of violence.

"Bull. Put it down that way."

"Bull Stanley," Lillie scrawled the name on a sheet of paper and looked up again. "Who yuh votin' for?"

"Ben Harman!"

Forty men heard the name. There was a hush. Bull never moved a muscle. As Lillie hesitated, he dropped a heavy hand on the paper with a bang.

"Can yuh write that name?" he demanded savagely. "Or must I write it for yuh?"

Lillie nodded quickly, scrawled the name, and

then swung the paper about for Bull to sign. Jonson stepped up. In the next minute, while Bull stood there, his thumbs stuck in his belt, Harman's name was repeated eleven times. He smiled.

"See that them votes is counted, pardner," he told the three on the election board.

Zach Lillie looked up to where Hunter stood, leaning easily against a post. The proprietor nodded.

"Count 'em," Hunter smiled coolly. "Count 'em and then frame 'em. In twenty-four hours they're going to be curiosities!"

Which was no news to Bull. He had not the faintest hope of Harman's election, nor even that the man had a chance. His had been a gesture—a gesture of allegiance to Lee Carleton. For the better element in Custer, he had no particular sympathy. In another town, the better element would have outlawed him.

He had no illusions with himself. Too many nooses awaited his thick neck; too many of these good people with whom he had thrown his fortunes here, held his name in contempt and hatred. He did not belong with them and he knew it.

But he did not belong with Hunter, either. He and his two companions belonged with no others, even of their own kind. As they rode, they fought—the Three. But they did belong to Lee. That had been sealed with her words—

"*My* men. . . ."

Bull scarcely noticed Jonson after that. He left the Palace alone, ignoring the curious eyes which followed his exit, shouldering a careless way through the milling crowd out into the street.

Walking back alone, in the shadow, Bull suddenly heard running, limping footsteps behind him. They were unaccompanied by any sound but the wheeze of hard breathing as they approached. Instead of turning, obeying the instinct of years, Bull fell sidewise into the dark space between a new saloon and a board-fronted tent.

In the next moment an old man hurried past, clutching at the bosom of the woolen shirt he wore. He was a very old man, and far from strong. He carried no gun, either. Bull waited until the hurrying footsteps, spurred by fear—for the man had looked affrightedly over his shoulder just as he got opposite Bull—had

passed on. He recognized him as one of the group which had followed him into the Palace to register a vote for Harman.

He had not long to wait there, motionless, as he had known. Barely ten seconds passed before stealthier footsteps approached. Bull, emerging slightly from his concealment, saw Jeff Millar, the sawed-off shotgun in his hairy paws, slink by with long strides. The eyes of Hunter's lieutenant were avid and cruel, predatory, and under his bushy beard, his thin lips were smiling with merciless confidence.

Bull hesitated as Millar passed. Whatever the cause, this was no quarrel of his; and yet—He must be getting soft, he told himself as he took up the trail.

People were passing in the street, unheeding. Millar shoved them aside without noticing. Ahead, after another frightened look behind him, the old man dove into the darkness between two shacks. Millar quickened his pace and Bull followed suit.

At the entrance to the dark alley, Bull stopped, flattening himself against the side. He heard Millar's voice—evidently the fugitive had got no farther than the rear end of the shacks.

"Hold on, Mart Lucas! Reckon yuh knew why you was runnin'."

Millar's voice was cruel, taunting. His huge bulk, in the half dark, towered over the wizened form of the man he addressed as Lucas.

"I don't know nothin', Jeff—I tell yuh, y' won't learn nothin' from—"

Here his speech was interrupted as Millar shook him violently. Bull's muscles tensed.

"It was you located the best strike in the Black Hills!" Hunter's henchman whispered fiercely. "Come through, Mart, or it's goin' tuh go hard with yuh when Hunter's boss here. If yuh behave now, we might split with yuh."

"I tell y', I don't know nothin'—!"

Lucas's quavering old voice was broken again as Millar shook him like a rat; and against the skyline, Bull could see the shotgun raised threateningly.

"Keep quiet, yuh damned old rat—!"

Millar stopped short. His fierce grip on the old man's throat relaxed and Lucas fell back with a gasp of thankfulness. Bull Stanley stood there, his thumbs stuck in his gun-belt, his eyes narrowed slits that flamed coldly even in the semi-darkness.

"What was the conversation?" Bull's voice was icy.

Millar snarled. "Buttin' in again, huh, Stanley?"

Bull shook his head. "I ain't started yet, Millar. Don't yuh reckon Hunter might want yuh down at the Palace?"

Millar stared at him, wild-eyed, shaking with inward wrath. His big hands gripped the shotgun menacingly, but he did not move its muzzle. The slightest false move, he knew, would mean death—streaking death from the mouth of Bull's six-gun. He stepped backward.

He started to speak; but evidently changed his mind. Suddenly, without a word, he whirled and went off down the alley. Bull stared after him until the old man's voice recalled him.

"I'm mighty 'bliged to y', pardner. Reckon I ain't a match for those fellers like I was once." His voice quavered with the weakness of age.

Bull turned to him gruffly. "Better keep outa their way," he advised. "If yuh know somethin' they want t' find out, they ain't gonna quit lookin' after it."

"I know." The old man's face was worn and

seamed; his thin fingers reached again for his shirt. "They'll have to kill me to get it, though. Thirty years o' prospectin', pardner, and it was me struck the gold in the Black Hills. I know where the best on't lays. Only it was reservation land then, and I couldn't touch it. But now—when the territory's opened—Hell, I'll be the richest man in this country!"

Bull looked at him thoughtfully. The richest man in this country. And what would it mean to this shaking old wreck who had wasted his life in a search for it? If Hunter and his gang didn't get it, then age would claim its toll. He shook his head.

"Better keep away from them hombres—and if yuh got a map on yuh, hide it," he added, his eyes on the hands that held to the woolen shirt so jealously.

The old man nodded. "They won't get it—not even if they kill me!" he declared in his quavering voice. "Hunter's been watchin' me, ever since news came that the land was opened. But the gold is mine!" His voice had risen to a high-pitched cry. "Thank yuh, pardner," he said, with a queer look, and hobbled uncertainly off into the dark.

CHAPTER X

Mike Costigan and Spade Allen were squatted thoughtfully before the fire they had built behind the tent, when Bull returned. He slipped past the dark wagon and stood between the two.

"Get yore guns oiled up," he commented briefly, as they looked up at him with the same question in their eyes. "Hunter's bein' elected and you've got t' go down an' vote right now."

"What for?" Mike demanded. "Ain't no good votin' against Hunter, is there?"

"A little," Bull returned. "It's what Miss Lee'd like us to do, an' it shows where we stand. Also—it's a chance for trouble. They was even thinkin' o' tryin' to stop me from votin'."

There was no trace of humor in his features as he passed on the news. But Mike swore at the mention of trouble, and in a second his gun was out. It did not need oiling, any more than did Spade's; but the ceremony was gone through religiously each day. Bull, with no

more to say, squatted beside them and went through the same operations.

None of them heard Lee come up until her polished little boot heel snapped a twig just behind Spade. The gambler whirled warily. Lee looked from one to the other, frowning slightly, and then stared meaningly at the weapons.

A shot came from the direction of the main street—another, followed by a wild yell. She hesitated. None of the three spoke. Lee's tiny chin took on an angle of firm resolution and her lips were compressed.

"I don't intend," she said firmly, "to have any of my employees in this shooting business—not to-night. Those guns, please!"

She held out her two hands. Mike hesitated, glancing toward Spade. Spade's features never changed; he looked at Bull. The latter was studying the girl intently; but she met his look unflinchingly.

"Those guns," she repeated distinctly.

Bull sighed. While Spade watched him, he turned the weapon butt outward and passed it to the girl. Mike, with a grimace, followed suit. Spade reluctantly obeyed. Lee hesitated.

"You can have them back when you need them," she said. "They'll be too much of a temptation on a night like to-night."

Imperiously she turned on her heel and went back to the wagon. His companions were staring at Bull scornfully.

"Well!" he bellowed. "Are we workin' for her or ain't we? Any of yuh crave t' be fired?"

Mike shrugged. His hand crept thoughtfully under his vest but he made no reply. Before Spade could speak, there came a volley of wild shots from the end of the street—yells and curses; and the Three got to their feet hurriedly in time to see a group of riders, waving their hats and brandishing pistols, bearing along the road. A torch led the galloping procession, and its red glow flickered on a crazily waving banner bearing the painted inscription—

HUNTER FOR SHERIFF

The procession noisily pulled to a halt in front of the tent. The torch-flame wavered. Lee ran from the wagon at the noise, and Bull stepped forward.

He recognized the laughing, half-drunk leader

of the gang as one of the men he had seen close to Hunter in the Palace earlier that evening. The fellow held up his hand.

"Come on!" he yelled to his dismounting companions. "Let's march through here an' let 'em all know who they're votin' for!"

Bull faced him. "Git off this property!" he said. "I'm warnin' yuh."

The leader laughed. "If it ain't ol' Bull Stanley—an' no gun!" There was a jeering roar from his henchmen. "Out o' the way, Bull —yore teeth is pulled!"

Still laughing, he started on. The torch bearer sprang beside him; the man with the banner hurried up. From the flap of the tent next door, Eric Jonson ran out, a rifle in his hands, his blue eyes blazing with anger. Behind him, in the aperture, stood his wife, the baby pressed close to her breast.

"Get out of here!" cried Jonson, in a voice that was hysterical with excitement. "Get out or I'll shoot. My baby's sick and your noise'll kill it."

The leader halted, blinked. Then he laughed as some one in the crowd yelled—"That's one less vote for Harman if it dies!"

But as they started forward again, Bull's heavy hand shot out without warning. It caught the collar of the leader's shirt and swung him off his balance. Bull held him out; the gunman's face was frozen with repressed fury.

"Get off this ground, damn you," he breathed.

His captive suddenly swore, glanced again at Bull's empty holster, and quick as a flash, his own gun was out, its muzzle against Bull's stomach. Silence fell upon the crowd behind them.

Lee stood riveted where she had halted. Spade's high hat came off cautiously, his face still unmoved, and his fingers felt inside. In a moment, the hat before him, a derringer was pointed at Bull's antagonist. Mike edged sidewise, his arms folded across his chest, the fingers of his right hand resting on the thirty-eight in the shoulder holster under his arm.

"Well," came Bull's steady voice, his eyes level with those of the man holding the gun, "— why don't yuh shoot?"

The man hesitated. Weaponless though he was, Bull was still a dangerous figure. He glanced sidewise at Mike, and his wicked little

eyes narrowed with fear at sight of the gun-butt protruding from the latter's vest.

Suddenly, without warning, Bull's fist came up. The man holding the gun dropped backward, the weapon falling from his fingers, as the blow caught him under the jaw. With only a single, strangled cry, he dropped like a log to the earth. Bull kicked the gun aside and turned to the victim's companions.

"Take him away," he said coldly, "before he gets hurt."

Somehow, all the fight and lawlessness had evaporated from the spirits of the band. Under Bull's steady eyes, while Mike and Spade edged nearer to them, they dragged the unconscious, groaning form of their leader out into the dark of the roadway. Jonson stood looking after them as they disappeared in silence.

"Damn them!" he whispered. "If they come again, I swear I'll kill them!"

Bull nodded thoughtfully and Lee stepped up to the side of the New Englander. "You said your baby was sick," she said quietly. "May I not see him—possibly I can help a little."

The man smiled. All the fury was erased from his white face as he looked at Lee. "It's

kind of you, ma'am," he said. "Come along. This is our camp."

But before she had gone, Bull touched the girl's arm. His face was stern.

"I'm goin' into the wagon and take them guns," he said quietly. "When yuh need a gun in this country, there's no time to go lookin' for it."

She smiled her contrition. "You're right, Bull—of course!" she said. "I should have known in the first place that you knew best; only I was afraid you three would go looking for trouble." She hesitated, and her hand rested on his arm. It seemed to burn him. "But now—I trust you, Bull!"

He stood staring after her, a disbelieving look on his weather-beaten face. She trusted him! He looked down at his sleeve, where her hand had rested. That spot seemed still to burn.

He turned back to his companions, to find Spade tucking away the derringer carefully and Mike caressing the thirty-eight he had drawn. The little man looked up.

"I wonder if that hombre's ever goin' t' know how near he came t' the pearly gates,"

he mused. "Bull, did yuh know yuh saved his life by knockin' him over?"

Bull nodded carelessly. "Get yore forty-fives back," he ordered tersely. "Yo're goin' down tuh vote—but no unnecessary killin'!" he added, catching the sudden gleam in Mike's old eyes.

He had no fear for his two companions. If he had, he would never have shown it. He only lifted his head and nodded when they left; and then he squatted down beside the fire, rolling a brown paper cigarette thoughtfully.

"Dreaming, Bull . . . ?"

He had no idea of how long he had been sitting there, his stern, cruel eyes narrowed at the depths of the flames, the cigarette unlighted between his fingers, the far-off shouts, cries and pistol-shots from the main street unheeded in his ears. Lee stood there, in her oddly becoming riding breeches; only her wide sombrero was off now, and her long hair hung carelessly over her shoulders. He looked up and his eyes softened at the gentle, unstudied loveliness of her.

"Just planning," he said, as she sat down beside him. He did not tell her his real

thoughts. Bull never spoke a great deal, and he never confided, even to the two who rode always on either side of him. "You told me you was going t' sell them thoroughbreds o' yours?"

She nodded. "That was the plan—father's." For a moment she hesitated. "You see, we knew little of what all this would be like. Father wasn't a business man. All his life, he'd lived in our home in Virginia, rearing race horses, drinking his juleps and visiting the neighbors. Occasionally hunting. He'd never had to work, or worry about money—neither had I."

Bull inclined his head thoughtfully. He had never questioned the reason for the girl's appearance in this land. He would have never thought to question it, though instinct had told him at the very first that she was from another world—a world that he had never even been able to fully visualize but which he had known existed.

"Then—things happened. What the papers were pleased to call financial reverses. At the last, father had to sell everything to pay a—a debt of honor. Everything but the horses. One of his friends told him that he could get most for them out here in the rush; it was just

beginning, then. We hoped to get plenty, all they were worth—and then return to Virginia and start over."

Bull did not look up when her voice died. He was still staring at the heart of the flames. Perhaps he couldn't put it into words, but he sensed all that had been left unsaid in the brave, steady little voice. The heartbreak, the cutting of old ties, old bonds—the long, hard journey westward. A new, harsh world.

"We hadn't thought any further than that." Lee's voice held a rising inflection, as though she expected Bull to speak. When he did not, she went on, "We ought to be able to sell the horses for plenty, don't you think, Bull? It wasn't a crazy scheme, was it? They're wonderful mounts."

He looked at her. "You don't want to sell them horses, do you, Miss Lee?"

Her eyes were misty. It was answer enough for him. He did not know Virginians particularly; but he knew lovers of horseflesh.

"It—it isn't a question of 'want-to,' is it?" she tried to smile.

"Maybe." Bull relighted his cigarette. "They're sure beautiful horses. And they'll

bring plenty. I imagine Hunter'd be willing to pay three times what you'd get in the east. So would some others. Because, when the rush across the line starts, the swiftest horses get the best land. *Sabe?*"

She was watching his impassive features eagerly. "Of course," he said. "That was what we thought."

Bull stared at her. "Yuh got some place to go, when you get rid of 'em—and turn back east?"

"No." Her head was averted. "The house is sold. I have no relatives."

He nodded. It was what he had expected. "Then, I'd say—don't sell them horses. Didn't yuh ever think o' making the run yoreself, Miss Lee—and gettin' the best land? There's gold in them hills, for the takin'. S'pose yuh got a stake—yuh could sell out afterwards and have some real money t' go back with!"

"You mean—I could stake land—alone?"

Bull frowned. "Ain't yuh hired us three?"

"You'd go with me, Bull?" she cried. "Right to the finish?"

"Ain't no time limit on our contract, as far as I know," he growled. "Besides, if we want

t' get our money, we'll have t' stick till yuh make some."

"Bull Stanley—you're wonderful!" Impulsively, she gripped his big hand in both her own. "I'll do it, Bull. We'll all make the rush together—and we'll all be rich!"

He looked up as she sprang, with flushed face and glistening, eager eyes, to her feet.

"Yuh better get to bed," he said softly. "Folks is early risers in this country, and there's a lot to be done to-morrow. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Bull," she said gently. For a moment, her little hand rested on his shoulder. "Oh, Bull, if you only knew how wonderful it feels—to have friends!" And turning, she ran off toward the wagon and disappeared.

CHAPTER XI

Hunter was elected sheriff of Custer and the surrounding community. Long before dawn, there had been no doubt remaining of this. Torchlight processions, hilarious drinking, wild shooting, had kept the town awake all during the long night. But no one had come near the Carleton camp again. The day following the election wore on past noon uneventfully.

Spade had ambled off, giving no excuse or saying no word of leave, as was his wont. He was somewhere about the town. Mike Costigan had driven a horse in for supplies. Bull was alone. He had just about made up his mind to begin work at curry-combing the Carleton horses, and had parted the flap at the rear of his tent, when he brought up sharply.

The sight that met his eyes caused them to narrow with anger, and the muscles in his powerful shoulders tensed fiercely.

A strange mount—pure white, with tiny feet

and ornate saddle and bridle, stood before the entrance to Lee's retreat—and holding its reins lightly in thin, carefully manicured fingers, was Layne Hunter. Lee shrank back against the wagon, on the rude steps which Spade had erected there that morning. Bull was near enough to hear Hunter's voice:

"I'm sorry to intrude, but I had to come, Miss Carleton," the sheriff was saying, in his smooth, suave voice. "There was something I had to tell you."

Lee's face was white. She was staring as if fascinated at the handsome, slender figure.

"I can't think of anything you might say which would interest me, Mr. Hunter," Bull heard her retort, quietly.

"Perhaps not—but I had to come." Hunter's eyes were liquid with admiration; he wore a contrite and humble air. "I came to apologize for yesterday," he went on. "I came to tell you how sorry I am that you should have been caused annoyance—believe me, it was not my intention. But if you'll forgive me, I'll promise that nothing will ever annoy you in this town again."

He seemed so sincere, so humble, that Bull

could only stare. He was not even surprised when the coldness in the girl's face melted, and her lips curved in a little, relenting smile.

"I can see why you might not have understood," she said. "They were my friends—they will be, always. And if you're really sorry—"

She held out her hand. A dull, unreasoning rage swept over Bull as he stood watching Hunter take it with a graceful gesture, bending low over it. It seemed as though the sheriff thought for a moment of carrying it to his lips; but some instinct must have warned him that such a move would be fatal.

"You are very kind to me," he said. "More kind than I merit, I'm afraid." He straightened. "I'm sheriff now, and Custer's going to be a decent town—a town of which even you will be able to approve, I hope."

Bull never knew what restrained him from rushing forward and pitching the dandy out into the street. Perhaps it was a realization of how futile such action would be. Lee, after all, was a woman, and Layne Hunter was a handsome, gallantly spoken man. In his humility, he was a charming figure. Lee didn't know

his kind as yet; she couldn't see beneath the pose.

Hunter was pointing with his riding whip toward a distant hilltop rising above the town to the northward.

"Things have already started," he said. "Better things. A stage line to Fargo opened to-day, and one of the first arrivals on the return trip was a minister—the Reverend Colvin Benson. He's beginning the building of a church up there."

Lee looked, as did Bull, and they saw the outlines of a naked cross standing stark against the blue bowl of the sky behind the summit of the hill. Two or three men could be seen, too, moving about there, and high poles had been driven into the earth.

Lee smiled. She was completely disarmed.

"How splendid!" she exclaimed.

Hunter was watching her eager face. "Custer is here to stay," he was saying. "Even after the rush starts, this is going to be a city—the central point for the new land-owners."

He hesitated, saw the horse that Bull had saddled a short time before. "I wonder—wouldn't you care to ride up that way with me,

Miss Carleton? We can meet the preacher, anyhow."

Lee hesitated. Then, with a little smile, she swung down and moved toward her horse. Bull did not hear her words. He simply stood there, glaring, his big hands opening and closing with a convulsive desire to get at Hunter's throat.

When she had gone, riding away side by side with the slender, graceful figure on the white horse, Bull's impulse to rub down the Carleton thoroughbreds was gone. She was alone—with that beast!

It was a bitter pill for Bull to have to swallow. He dropped heavily to a big, sawed-off tree-trunk near the fire and commenced to roll a cigarette. His face was a mask, frozen with impotent fury. For the first time in his life he was helpless. Neither guns nor strength had a place in the solution of this problem. Yet if need be, he assured himself, Hunter would have to die before he would let Lee fall into his hands.

Bull sat there for a long time, motionless, smoking slowly. His first cigarette burned down and then he lighted another, still staring at the cold embers of the fire.

At length, without volition, his hand reached inside his open shirt and drew forth a crumpled, stained sheet of paper that had been folded several times and looked as though it might have been on his person for months. With unsteady fingers he opened it and read:

Jim, dear—

I'm going away to join the man I love. He's sent for me and we're to be married. You wouldn't approve, so I'm not waiting to say good-by—only praying for God to bless you.

Your loving sister,

Millie.

Bull's huge fist crumpled on the paper so tightly that it seemed about to tear. Then, methodically, carefully, he folded it again and held it for a moment in his hand. If his eyes had been cruel and hard before, they were deadly now, murderous with a gleaming flame far in their depths.

"Need a new hand, pardner?"

Bull jerked up with surprise. He was looking into the eyes of a young man—young and tall and broad-shouldered, wearing soiled buckskin chaps and a blue flannel shirt.

"What?" Bull snapped. He took in in a glance the slender waist and powerful shoulders of the youth, a rather infectious smile and humorous gray eyes.

"A job," the other retorted. "I'm lookin' for work, and with all those horses you've got here, I thought I might find some. I'm Tom Neville, from points east."

The youth was not flippant; but he carried himself with a cool, confident air that bespoke a knowledge of the open spaces and of men as cool and confident as he. He pushed back a wide sombrero from a rather perspiring forehead.

"Just rode in," he explained. "Come for the rush, but I've got to live till it starts. Need anybody?"

In Bull's savage mood, his very presence was an affront. Hastily he tucked away the crumpled sheet of paper and got to his feet, towering over Tom Neville.

"No, I don't need any help," he said distinctly. "I've got plenty. And the next time you come into a strange back yard—knock first!"

He turned away without another word, while

the applicant for work stood staring wonderingly after him. For a moment, the youth seemed on the point of hurling an answer after that burly back; but he thought better of it. With a short, indulgent laugh, he turned on his heel and made his way out past the picketed Carleton horses.

Bull sat in the tent to await the return of his two companions. He had formulated, by the time they returned, only one grave opinion. Beyond it, there was no answer. But it was not a pleasing thought. His cruel face was lined and hard when the tent-flap was stealthily pulled aside and Mike Costigan stood weaving unsteadily in the entrance.

Behind Mike was Spade, slightly more steady but more than evidently aware of his inebriation. Bull got to his feet with a curse, swung back the opening; and with a single push, sent Mike past him and into a pile of blankets in the corner. Spade followed so quickly that a cry of protest on his lips was stifled by the blankets into which he fell.

Bull stood over them in a rage. "Drunk again!" he swore.

Mike looked up and blinked. Then a slow

grin overspread his countenance. He had discovered the reason for Bull's violence!

"So that's it!" he hiccoughed cheerily. "So are we!"

Bull snorted his disgust and stood staring scornfully at the two. For a moment they sat blinking at him. Then, with his usual philosophical sigh, Mike painfully withdrew a flask from his hip pocket, turned meaningly to Spade, and held the bottle aloft to regard it more at leisure.

Crack!

Bull's pistol had whipped out like a flash and part of the same motion was his quick jerk on the trigger. Mike stared in dull astonishment at the bottom of the flask—all that was left of it, in his hand. The liquor had spattered all over him as Bull's lead found its mark.

"That, Bull," he said with grave distinctness, "was not only unkind—it was—"

"Shut up!"

Bull strode across the tent and rested a leg on a bench. His two familiars sat looking at him. Gradually, as they blinked, sobriety returned. Bull had something heavily on his mind, they could see.

"A fine bunch we are," the leader said at last, in deadly, purposeful tones,"—to be the guardians of a girl like that. D' yuh know that she's gone ridin' with Hunter?"

"Hunter?" Mike was sober now; the name was like a curse. Spade straightened; he said nothing, only waited.

"Yes, Hunter—and I couldn't tell her not to go, because she's my boss. What's more, Hunter knows us—and knowin' him as well don't help any. He apologized for yesterday—so damn sweet about it that she fell."

Spade felt for his pipe. "What's the answer?" he asked at last.

"We've gotta find somebody—somebody fit for the job, to take care o' her."

Mike considered. "With Layne Hunter for sheriff, we're none too safe in this town now," he said thoughtfully. "I reckon before long it's goin' t' be a case o' kill or get killed."

"We can take care o' Hunter," Bull snapped. "I've about decided to polish him off, anyhow—if it only wasn't for the little lady. She'd object, I reckon. But there's other sheriffs. One of 'em 's liable to come pokin' around here

any minute, expectin' us to land in just such a town as this. Then what?''

Spade lighted his pipe thoughtfully. ''You're right, Bull,'' he agreed. ''It's shoot or get shot with us, any town west o' the Mississippi. An' if we get shot—how about her?''

''Exactly.'' Bull looked up and his grim face softened. ''You didn't see her with Eric Jonson's baby this morning,'' he went on quietly—gently, for him. ''I did. And I knew then that what Miss Lee needs, is—a husband!''

''A husband?'' Mike repeated in frightened tones. ''Bull, yuh ain't thinkin'—yuh ain't thinkin' of one of us, are yuh?''

Bull's snort of rage was his only answer. ''She's decided to make the rush when it starts,'' he said. ''She's got no home. It'd be a fine thing for her to find one out here—with the right man.''

Mike looked relieved. He stood up.

''Reckon it's up to us to find one, then,'' he decided. ''Let's you an' me take another look around town, Spade. We must 'a' passed up a lot o' people the last trip.''

''From the looks of yuh,'' commented Bull acidly, ''the only thing yuh didn't pass up was

the liquor supply. Get out—and don't come back till yo're sober!"

Spade and Mike hurried out, anxious to get away from Bull's immediate vicinity while he was in his present vicious mood. They knew him. Inseparable as they all were, Bull would fight his best friend gun to gun when he was in this mood.

"I don't know so much about findin' anybody worth Miss Lee in this town," Spade said, "but any bar is better than sittin' near Bull."

"Hell!" finished Mike. "He got me all sober and now I'll have t' start all over again."

CHAPTER XII

Bull sat there alone after they had gone. From time to time, his hands stole toward the inner pocket of his shirt, touching the stiff paper there—and then away. His eyes were glowering.

There was harness and bridle to be cleaned, the horses to be rubbed down—a long series of jobs; but he was in the mood for none of them. His fists clenched and unclenched as though eager to close upon something more tangible than air. He would have welcomed any kind of enemy just then.

At last, realizing that he had been staring for upward of half an hour through the rear of his tent, waiting for Lee's return, he got to his feet with a curse. She was safe enough with Hunter—for to-day. The man had his own methods; at the first he would simply seek to ingratiate himself with her. Gradually he would find her confidence—and then—!

Bull buckled his gun belt tighter, took a last

survey of his lifeless surroundings, and went out. Spade and Mike, he knew, would be at some bar. But Lee had to have a husband, and if there was one in town, he must be procured. Bull had no fears. Once he found the man—a man the direct antithesis of Layne Hunter, that was enough. Lee was sweet and pretty enough to break any man's heart in bigger cities than Custer. And Bull intended to make certain that his choice of a husband had free rein.

By instinct, his steps took him toward the Palace Bar. It was there, for one reason or another, that every arrival in Custer went first. A new train of immigrants was just arriving; as Bull reached the center of town, the middle of the long line was swinging past. The vanguard had already deployed in different directions and had begun to throw up camps.

The bar was crowded, as always. Bull shouldered an aggressive way to one corner, across from the stairs which led to the balcony, and ordering a drink stood there. One or two of the hangers-on offered conversation; but at sight of Bull's angry, belligerent eyes when he turned to them, they moved off.

He swept the scene with his troubled gaze.

The youth who had come to him that afternoon for work—and who had been so unceremoniously chased off—he recognized as the latter entered the saloon. Bull watched him interestedly. On second thought, he was rather a handsome young buck, and something about his swinging, free stride made Bull nod slowly to himself in approval.

The boy did not come to the bar. Instead, with a vague look around him, he hitched the small bag he carried onto a table and sat down. He seemed tired. Bull turned away thoughtfully. The youngster—Neville, he'd said his name was—had been looking for a job. That was as good a scheme as any. If he took him on, it would throw him into daily contact with Lee.

Bull, as he bent thoughtfully over the untouched drink before him, was blissfully unaware that he was the subject of a great deal of attention in the Palace. Hunter was not in sight; Bull did not yet know that upon his election to office, the sheriff had designated a big room in the rear of the saloon as his headquarters.

Through a square hole in the wall of this room, Jeff Millar was watching. A thin sneer

curved his lips as he turned back to where Hunter lay back in his chair, his booted feet on the table before him.

"Hell, chief!" Millar's sawed-off shotgun came up nervously. "It'd be an easy job to finish him from here. Nobody'd know who done it and Bull Stanley wouldn't be causin' any more trouble in Custer."

Hunter shook his head. "Not yet, Jeff. If I can, I'd like to get Stanley into a gunfight and have the citizens hang him for murder. Or else get a couple of sheriffs up here after him. He's wanted in a lot of towns—and I'd like to see Miss Lee's face when they grabbed him and his precious pals."

Millar's eyes were resting on the slim waist of the girl Millie, who sat in a corner alone, on the balcony, instinctively shrinking from the other girls of the dive. He turned back to his chief.

"Miss Carleton, eh?" he muttered. "Speaking of yore loves, chief—that gal Millie there. . . . She ain't much good to the place."

Hunter looked up and met Millar's cunning eyes with a shrewd, meaning smile. "You always did like her, didn't you, Jeff?"

Jeff Millar nodded understandingly. "Only

she's been yours, chief. If it's this Carleton gal now. . . ."

"It is," Hunter agreed lazily. "I think I'd almost be willing to marry Lee Carleton, Jeff—particularly if she kept those horses. But Millie—if you want her, she's yours!"

Millar's eyes lighted with a predatory flame. "Will she come—?"

Hunter's face was hard. He glanced through the aperture at the white, fearful features of the girl who shrank back from the crowd.

"She's coming downstairs now, Jeff," he said coolly. "Meet her when she gets to the floor, and tell her *I said* she belonged to you!" He laughed. "She knows what that means—by now!"

Millar's eyes glistened. Quietly he slipped through the door, mingled unnoticed for a moment with the crowd in the room; and then, as Millie reached the bottom of the steps, looking about fearfully he sprang to her side.

"Where y' goin', Millie?" His hand closed over hers where it rested on the rail; and when she tried to draw it away, it tightened cruelly.

She stared at him dazedly, read the look in his eyes, and shook her head.

"I—I'm going out," she faltered. "Up the hill. I told the new preacher I was coming—this afternoon."

Millar laughed. "You're comin' back up to a table with me," he assured her. Then he added, in a low, meaning voice, "Hunter says you're to do as I say, and I want to talk to you. *Sabe?*"

"Please. . . ."

Frantically, she sought to draw away her hand; but Millar was insistent. She understood—well. It was not enough that Layne Hunter had betrayed her into this shame. Now he was passing her on, discarded, to one of his men.

The realization had been there for days, but before the actual moment, Millie flinched. Her pretty face was pallid and pinched with fear and misery. Before the look in Millar's ugly, avid features, she shrank back. Wildly, her gaze swept the smoke-filled room.

Her eyes fell upon young Neville, who was watching the scene on the stairs with detached interest. Only a boy, she thought—and yet, before something he discerned in her gaze, he brought up sharply. Her eyes were sweeping

the bar now. Suddenly she stopped and pressed the back of her hand against her parted lips to stifle a cry.

She was staring at Bull Stanley.

At that moment, he was not looking up. His head was bent over his glass, thoughtfully. Millar had no knowledge of the cause behind the fear in her eyes; he knew only his own fierce impulse to sweep her into his arms. He came nearer, his face hardening.

"You'll do as I say—as Hunter says, Millie—or you'll be sorry right now!"

Fear lent her strength. Turning, with a little cry, she jerked her hand free and sprang away, back up the stairs. Millar fell backward with surprise; then he darted forward. In the same instant, Tom Neville's chair was kicked from under him and he sprang for Hunter's lieutenant.

They met at the foot of the steps. Tom Neville's outflung arm caught Millar at the throat and the bully halted, knocked from his balance in his rush. Then he saw his antagonist; and with a bellow of rage, came back, his fists flailing.

Without a sound, Tom whirled and met his

rush. Crack! The boy's fist darted between the flailing arms and landed at the point of Millar's chin. The latter dropped back, headlong to the floor. There was a loud cry; and from the open square in the wall, a whistle blew.

It was the signal. Just as Millar gained his feet, half a dozen of the loungers in the place started for the stairway. The lone defender dodged a bottle that crashed behind him and caught the first of his attackers behind the ear, sending him reeling backward. Millar came up again, scrambling, in time to meet a straight arm blow that threw him into the arms of the man behind him.

The bartender, looking up, grasped a bung-starter and held it poised to throw. In that instant, Bull raised his head. His gun was out by instinct. But instead of shooting, he reversed the weapon and the butt tapped hard on the bartender's skull. The bung-starter fell to the floor about three seconds before the man who had held it.

"Here's a chair—kid!"

Over the heads of the milling mob, Bull tossed one of the heavy pine chairs nearest to hand.

Tom caught it deftly, swung it—and it crashed, breaking apart, into two of his antagonists. On the heels of it, Bull Stanley's gun roared twice and its owner flung himself into the fray.

Bull seldom stopped to strike. His big arms brushed men right and left from his path; picking up one of them, he threw him back into the shouting mass, unconscious.

To right and left his powerful fists flailed, and men dropped. Blows rained upon him; but he never felt them. There was a little space about the bottom of the stairs now. As Bull gained it, Tom dropped back another of his attackers with a straight right and Bull, reversing his pistol, sent another sprawling.

Then he was on the bottom step. "Get out yore gun!" he commanded. "This is goin' to be shootin' in a minute!"

In a swift circle, he covered the cowering mob. There was a cry as some one recognized him—

"Look out—it's Bull Stanley!"

Icily he smiled as they drew back. "Come on, kid," he commanded. "Let's get out before we have t' start killin'."

They backed to the door, the crowd a re-

spectful distance away. Bull saw a weapon flash just as he reached the opening—he fired. There was a curse of pain and the revolver dropped.

"Winged him!" he muttered. "That's all—now run!"

Tom obeyed. They gained the side of the Palace in safety, though two bullets sped harmlessly after them, ducked through an alleyway, crossed the street behind two entangled ox-carts, and drew up panting in the rear of the Carleton camp. Bull looked all around, sighed, and returned the gun to its holster.

Then he turned to regard his companion. Tom Neville had put away his revolver, which he had not fired, and was engaged in binding a handkerchief about a damaged, bleeding hand. He looked up at Bull and grinned. There was something infectious about that grin. Though Bull did not return it, as a matter of principle, he could not help but try to reconcile it with the fighting fury that this youth had been but a few moments before. Beside, the fight had served to help restore his humor.

"You're the fellow told me to get off his lot an hour ago," Neville smiled. "That's funny."

Bull did not reply directly. "That wasn't my lot," he averred. "And it ain't particularly funny, that I can see. How'd yuh get into that scrap back there?"

Neville shrugged. "I'm not sure. There was a girl—pretty little thing, white-faced. And this bird with the chin-whiskers was trying to force her to do something. She was afraid. Then she turned and ran—and when he tried to follow, I stopped him."

Bull nodded grimly. For a moment, his hard eyes took on that far-off expression again, the present forgotten; then he came back.

"That was Millar," he said. "Dangerous hombre." He considered for a moment. "Did you tell me you was lookin' for a job?"

"Exactly."

"Married?"

"Not a-tall. As soon as I get that bag I left back there, I'll have everything I own right in my hand."

Bull grunted. "All right, yo're hired," he decided. "Maybe you'll get wages and maybe yuh won't—sometime. Follow me."

Smiling, Tom Neville obeyed.

CHAPTER XIII

Tom Neville was not particularly an inspiring vision when Bull presented him to Mike and Spade behind the tent. His right hand was bleeding profusely, even through the handkerchief he had knotted about it; there was a gash in his chin, his hat was awry, and he had a smudge across his forehead, where some weapon had glanced off.

Mike was frankly skeptical. His regard of Tom was careful and precise, as was Spade's. The young man stood it in good grace, though with apparent surprise, while they examined him from the tip of his rakish Stetson to the toes of his soft boots.

"It's the new hand," Bull grunted; and added meaningly, "—and the candidate for—the other. His name's Tom Neville. Neville, these are two bad hombres—Spade Allen and Mike Costigan. If yo're a sheriff, here's yore chance."

Tom looked questioningly at the man who had hired him. "Are they looking for a fashion model," he demanded, "—or a hand?"

Mike blinked. "What we look for ain't never been questioned—with safety," he returned. "You got a big job, young 'un, and we're mighty particular about it. Bull, d'yuh think he'd look any better if he got washed and cleaned up, sorta?"

"He's been in a fight," Bull returned, as calmly as though he were speaking of an animal brought up for inspection. "Ain't a-tall bad when he's dressed." He turned to Tom. "There's a basin and a pail o' water behind the wagon there. Go get yoreself cleaned up before yuh meet the boss."

Smiling, Tom turned away to obey. Mike's eyes had lighted appreciatively at mention of the fight; and he followed Tom's swinging shoulders with more respect until the young man disappeared behind the wagon. Then he turned to Bull with a mute question in his squinting eyes. Spade was waiting, too; but it was seldom that Spade spoke.

Briefly, Bull retailed the account of the mêlée at the Palace. His approval seemed sufficient.

A William Fox Picture. *Three Bad Men.*

THE THREE BAD MEN PROTECT THE GIRL AGAINST A BAND OF MARAUDERS.

"That part's all right," Mike agreed. "Now if he only looks nice an' pretty when he comes back—"

"Miss Lee come in yet?" Bull interrupted.

"Not yet. But her horse is back. I think she's holdin' Mrs. Jonson's baby." He glanced toward the New Englander's tent. "I sure hope she likes him; I'm dead set on this husband business. Any minute we're goin' t' have t' pull outa here."

"Not any minute," Bull put in, and his eyes were hard again. "This is just the part of country *he'd* come to, and I'm goin' t' wait till I'm sure *he's* not here."

Mike looked from Bull to the silent Spade, and a quick glance of understanding passed between them. They had heard of this "he" before; but Bull had never explained. It was an old grudge, doubtless; and when the moment came, it would be settled under cover of the smoke of flaming forty-fives. In any event, they'd be in on it, so it didn't matter particularly whether they knew the cause or not.

Mrs. Jonson had just reached the entrance to her tent, and Lee Carleton emerged, smiling, the baby in her arms. The Three stood looking

over, silent—only staring at the girl, who was unconscious of their presence in the vicinity. Mike nodded.

"For once you hit it right, Bull. What that little gal needs is a husband. Only—I'd like to be around most o' the time, just t' remind him every now an' then that he ain't worth her."

Lee's face was radiant, almost ethereal. The infant was handed over to its mother; and the girl, catching sight of her friends, came swinging across the intervening space toward them. She was whistling and suddenly she broke off, staring beyond the Three.

They had not remembered Tom. He was quite close to them, and as they turned in unison, they saw him standing with parted lips, simply staring at the vision Lee made. Her little chin went up and she frowned. She continued her way at a slower pace and brought up before Bull, her eyes still on Tom.

"Who is this, Bull?"

"This is the new hand, Miss Lee. Tom Neville, meet yore real boss—Miss Lee Carleton."

But Tom seemed unable to stop his staring.

He mumbled some incoherent words, at which Lee frowned. Then she proceeded to look him over coolly, in much the same aloof manner of Mike and Spade. When she had finished, she nodded thoughtfully.

"I suppose it's all right—but what made you think we need any more hands, Bull?" she asked.

Bull rubbed his unshaven chin dubiously. "I just kind o' figured we did, Miss. These two"—with a contemptuous jerk of his finger toward Mike and Spade—"they ain't worth much. They like the bar o' the Palace better than work, and I'm kind o' busy worryin' about you most o' the time. We need somebody to take care o' the horses."

"But the—"

"Wages?" Bull interrupted. "That's all settled. They're payable whenever yo're ready, Miss Lee."

She hesitated. There was a little gleam in her eye that was akin to mirth as she looked over her new employee again. Washed and cleaned up, Tom Neville made a handsome figure, and Bull knew that she was not unaware of it. She pursed her red lips thoughtfully.

"All right, then," she said at last. "I suppose he'll do. You're hired, young man."

"Thank you!"

Bull turned quickly at Tom's voice. Had there been irony in the simple words? He caught a gleam of something in the boy's eyes; but as Lee turned carelessly away, it was gone. He was serious.

"Now that that's settled," he said coolly, "where do I begin?"

Bull waited until Lee had reached the wagon and gone inside. Mike and Spade were watching him.

"Currycomb, brush, sponge and water—you'll find 'em all under the wagon there. And there's a string o' thoroughbreds that need real attention. Yo're excused!"

If Tom Neville had any doubts or wonders about his new-found position, he concealed them well. At the appearance of Lee Carleton, his determination seemed to have been formed. Whistling, he set off for his task, looked up, smiling, as he passed the open wagon entrance, and continued down to where the horses were picketed. Bull followed and saw that he got immediately to work, then returned to his tent.

Mike was off searching for some rocks to rebuild the dilapidated fireplace. Spade sat hunched up on the tree stump in the yard, absently fingering his pack of cards.

"Well," he muttered when Bull came up, "what next?"

Bull rolled a cigarette. Though he did not smile, nor did his harsh features relax, Spade knew him to be in better humor than he had observed for some itme.

"Next?" he repeated. "Nothing particular. From now on, we let nature take its course."

Mike Costigan ambled back a little later and looked from one to the other of the two fatuously self-contented individuals sitting there. He grunted scornfully.

"Yore new hand," he observed, "is gone. The blanket's off'n the first horse, an' that's all. He ain't touched her hoofs yet."

Bull looked up sharply. "Where's Miss Lee?"

"She ain't in sight neither." Mike took a bite of his plug and waited.

Bull looked at Spade. "Nature," he remarked sententiously, "has begun to take her course."

CHAPTER XIV

Over the Carleton camp, the spirits of the Three brooded with what was a near approach to contentment. The state, however, had nothing in common with the rest of the town.

Layne Hunter's election had been like a burning brand which set flame to the bonfire of lawlessness. A reign of terror began, almost unprecedented in that country. At the time of the election, Hunter's gang—composed of gamblers, camp-followers, crooked gunmen, and the riff-raff of the west which was attracted to every boom movement—had been in the majority in Custer.

Such as were not one with them, they had been able to intimidate. As Bull had known from the beginning, his election had never been for a moment in doubt. Then, as the days passed, the long train of immigrants poured in unceasingly, ignorant of what awaited them, and Hunter and his men retained their grip because none dared speak.

The stage line inaugurated between Fargo and Custer was held up three times in the ten days following the election. Daily, straggling immigrants were held up and robbed; they came to town shouting their woes and were curtly dismissed from the office of the sheriff. Once there had been an attack by masked men on the volunteers who were helping the Reverend Colvin Benson to construct the church on the hillside.

For all of these outrages there had been no attempt to discover the culprits, nor any organized effort to prevent further violence. Hunter went his usual way, smooth and suave, smiling, assuring questioners that he was doing his best—if he were in a good mood; and if the complaints grew annoying, throwing them off contemptuously.

He was master of Custer. There was no way of ousting him; and so long as he was in office, his bullies were afforded the run of the town. There was no semblance of a jail, and there were never arrests.

If the Carleton camp remained unmolested, it was because, in spite of the desperate character of Hunter's henchmen—the dangerous

reputation enjoyed by the Three was more desperate still.

"What a town this'd be," Mike sighed upon one occasion, "—if we hadn't joined the Sunday School before we come here." But Bull's scowl had put a period to that thought—if, indeed, there had been anything behind Mike's words other than the words themselves.

A kind of armed neutrality existed between their camp and Hunter's—a neutrality that did not delude Bull for a moment. Sooner or later, the sheriff would strike. Bull and his companions were thorns in his side. He wanted the horses, because he wanted to be first in the rush. And he wasn't the type to offer payment for them.

Against the frequently expressed wishes of Mike and Spade, Bull had repeatedly refused to interfere in Hunter's courtship. In some-way, he sensed that it was for the best. Eventually, the girl would distinguish between his suave gallantry and the merciless avidity lying so close underneath it, and the honest, almost silent adoration with which Tom Neville was regarding her.

Tom had progressed swiftly. His first attraction had been swift and sure. Since setting eyes upon Lee, he had been able to see no one or nothing else in the mad, churning world in which they all were. With a humility matching that assumed by the Three, he accepted her commands. With a determined, silent masterfulness, he managed to be always near her when she left the camp.

Lee knew, too. Tom was too decent, too handsome and inherently fine, to be ignored. She had had many admirers in her twenty years, but few like this cool young man whom even Bull Stanley approved.

Hunter, at his advent, had seemed to slip into a minor position. He sensed it. Once, when he had gone riding with Lee and she had insisted that Tom accompany them, he had known definitely. Tom's grave silence had matched his own sullen aloofness on that ride; and Lee had appeared to enjoy both.

But after it there was a difference. Hunter's cruel mouth twitched nervously every day that he passed the string of Carleton thoroughbreds on his way to the Palace. Seeing them in the

green bowl of the plain five miles outside, where they went every day for the grass and exercise, was a torment.

The news had come to him that Lee had changed her mind and intended now to make the rush. Hunter knew what that meant. The Carleton horses could outdistance any mount in Custer—even his own white mare, of which he was so proud.

Gold—the gold of the Black Hills, the Carleton horses—and Lee Carleton's slim, radiant beauty. . . . These things held Layne Hunter's mind enthralled. At times it seemed his thoughts of them would madden him.

Here he was, king in a mad, upturned land; and yet the things he wanted most he could not secure.

His fist banged down fiercely on the desk in the room behind the saloon. Jeff Millar, standing by the door, turned slowly and met his chief's eyes.

"There's going to be a showdown very soon, Jeff."

Millar nodded. "The gang is ready, chief. Anything you say."

Hunter laughed harshly and got to his feet.

"What I want most," he swore, "—the gang can't get."

"It can get the gold," remarked Millar sententiously. "After that, you can buy almost anything else."

Hunter was staring at himself in the mirror. He nodded quietly at the words and adjusted his narrow tie more carefully.

"There's only a few days before the rush. Keep an eye on old Mart Lucas, Jeff. We've got to have his map. After the map—the Carleton horses. Then everything's ours."

"Everything but the owner of the horses," put in Millar, with a hard smile. "What's my job?"

"Lucas," replied Hunter briefly. "And no shooting. I'll have Craigen and Rush take care of the horses—they graze every day in the same valley. But it's hanging if they get caught, and I need you too much to let you take a chance on that."

He turned away from the mirror and adjusted his sash. Then he went out, moving idly among the hangers-on at the bar until he reached the street, where the white horse stood at the hitching rack. In a moment he had

turned, forced a careless way among the pedestrians in the street who regarded his passage in an ominous silence, and was headed out toward the hills.

The Reverend Benson had discarded his first intent to build his church on the summit of the hill following the raid of the masked riders. Only the cross stood there now, naked and forlorn as its message, against the blue sky; the building of the church in the hollow directly beneath it was progressing rapidly. Hunter smiled as he passed by.

The preacher, an old man with silvery white hair like a halo, and steady, understanding eyes which seemed to have looked upon the grief and pain of the ages, stood aside to watch him pass. At the minister's side, old Mart Lucas halted, a beam over his shoulder.

"This church'll go next," the prospector's quavering voice prophesied. "There ain't room in the same town for a Church o' God and Sheriff Layne Hunter."

Benson shook his head dubiously. "I cannot understand," said he. "When I came, he promised me help."

"He didn't think you'd get nowhere," Lucas

replied. "Now, there's too many as wants a church, parson. It's comin' to be a meetin' place for them agin Hunter and his ways."

The minister nodded, sighed, and turned away.

Hunter, meanwhile, had turned his face toward the shallow valley where the Carleton horses ran by day. For a week they had been like a magnet to him. Daily he had ridden out there, to stand on the summit of the hill and watch. Twice Bull Stanley and his men had been herding them, and he had spurred off.

As he reached the spot, he looked about quickly for a sign of watchers. But Bull was nowhere in sight; neither were the other two of his gang. On the opposite side of the valley, however, he discerned two horsemen. Lee Carleton he recognized at once. A few paces away from her, leaning thoughtfully forward in his saddle, was Tom Neville.

Hunter's eyes lighted. In another moment, he was spurring across the open space and the white mount was flashing like a streak up the side of the farther slope. There was a slight, almost unwilling admiration in Lee's eyes as

he rode up, for Hunter's horsemanship was superb.

He swept off his wide sombrero with a graceful flourish. "This is more than I had hoped for, Miss Lee!" he exclaimed. "I rode out—I had to, to look over your superb horses. And I find the owner, too. I understand you're joining the rush when it begins."

Of Tom Neville he took not the slightest notice. But the boy's eyes were flaming with anger as Hunter deliberately turned his back upon him and worked his white mount between the two. Lee, glancing over the sheriff's shoulder, frowned at the look on her companion's face.

"I've decided to go—yes," she said quietly. "But with that mount, you should have no fear of mine, Mr. Hunter."

He stroked the neck of the white beast thoughtfully. "Perhaps not," he said. "Nevertheless, I'd like to buy one or two of yours." He bent closer to her. "Or all of them—anything!" he said in a low but impassioned voice. "But even that wouldn't win for me their mistress. Could I ever seek for that, Miss Lee?"

Tom Neville had stood enough. "Those horses aren't for sale, Hunter," he announced, spurring his mount forward. "Is that all you wanted to know?"

Lee was frowning again. Hunter turned coolly, as though perceiving her companion for the first time.

"No, it isn't," he said smoothly. "Is that all you have to say?"

"Not by a long shot!" Tom swore between his teeth. "I've wanted to tell you for some time that you're not needed anywhere near Miss Carleton. She's got plenty of escort when she wants it—and you're not part of it!"

"Tom—!" Lee's voice was broken with fear.

"Why, you insolent young pup!" hissed Hunter. He raised his riding whip. "I'll have you ridden out of town—"

But the upraised whip was enough. Tom Neville only saw a blaze of red before his eyes—that, and Hunter's sneering, contemptuous face. He had sprung from his saddle in one bound; and in the same movement, knocking the whip aside, he caught Hunter by the collar and dragged him to the ground. His fingers gripped the sheriff's throat.

"You hound!" he cried. "I'll finish you now, and—"

Lee's hand on his arm was not imperative; it was her voice, commingling anger and a broken plea, that brought him to himself.

"Tom—stop, at once!"

He recoiled, his eyes blazing and his fingers twitching. Hunter got to his feet, adjusting his collar coolly; but his mouth was twisted with repressed rage.

"I think we both understand," he barely whispered, "that we will meet—later."

"It can't be too soon—"

"Tom!"

Lee had drawn herself up imperiously. Her dark eyes flashed annoyance and anger. The boy turned to her appealingly, but she intercepted his words.

"You may go back, Tom," she said quietly. Mr. Hunter will escort me into town."

He stared at her mutely, appealingly; but there was no relenting in her determined little face. Then he looked at Hunter—a long look, and turned away. Finally he nodded dully.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly, and mounted.

Lee stood watching him ride off. Even his

mount seemed to have borrowed of his dejection. It was a long time before its plodding pace carried Tom over the edge of the hill.

Hunter straightened with his confident smile. "It is good," he murmured, "in a wild place like this, to find some one who knows the difference between a gentleman and a boor." His eyes caressed her.

"I'd rather not speak of it," she said coolly, and mounted. For a while they circled the bowl in which the Carleton horses were running free.

Hunter seemed considering. Lee was unusually silent. At length, with a sigh, she drew up, her eyes on her mounts below. Her piquant face was grave and thoughtful. Hunter's mount was close beside her and he bent very near.

"Miss Lee," he protested, "I've got to know! Why have you avoided me lately? Can't you see it's hurt me?"

He wore his mask of easy humility again. She turned with unfeigned surprise. "But I don't understand, Mr. Hunter. I have neither avoided you nor otherwise."

"You mean you don't know," he persisted, "you won't recognize—that I love you?"

Lee was startled at the swiftness of his at-

tack. For a moment, her eyes clouded. But before she could speak, he rushed on impetuously:

"You must know!" he cried. "I've loved you from the first. Don't you realize that it's been my influence which has left you undisturbed in your camp? Rough as these men are, they know what my word in Custer is worth—and I've let it be known that the first man to annoy you—reckons with me!"

"That's mighty fine, Mr. Hunter. Do yuh speak as a man or as a sheriff—'cause if yo're still sheriff o' Custer, there's work for yuh!"

Hunter whirled. Neither he nor Lee had been aware of Spade Allen's quiet approach. The gambler had picketed his horse at the edge of the growth behind them, and come on afoot. Now his impassive features searched the sheriff's face innocently.

With an effort, Hunter controlled his fury at the interruption. "Work?" he repeated.

"That's it. Old Mart Lucas's been killed and young Neville's caught the murderer!" Spade shifted his tobacco. "Thought you ought t' know—for more reasons than one!"

CHAPTER XV

For a long time there was silence on the little knoll. Spade stood his ground with the same imperturbable countenance as always, his keen, shrewd eyes on the sheriff's face. That face was the battlefield of a number of emotions in the interval—rage, fury—even fear. But then Hunter's old cool assurance returned.

"It sounds serious," he said. "We'd better get back to town." To Lee, he smiled as though nothing had happened. "You'll forgive me, Miss Lee?—the interruption wasn't my seeking, you know."

"I'm going with you," she said quietly. "Get your horse, Spade."

The gambler had already started for his mount. In half a minute, the three were streaking across the brow of the hill and on the way to town. Spade said no more. He rode on at his employer's side, grim-faced and silent, his eyes set dead ahead.

At the outskirts of the town, Hunter turned keen eyes upon his informant. "Where is it?" he demanded.

"Lucas' tent—right near our camp," Spade replied, unmoved.

Hunter streaked on ahead, urging his mount through the narrow alleyways of the outskirts. He seemed to have forgotten Lee. When she turned to Spade, who was still riding beside her, she surprised a grim smile on his face.

"Is it true, Spade?" she demanded. "Was some one really murdered?"

"Just about," he replied briefly. "Reckon the old fellow's still alive but I doubt if he'll speak again. It was one of Hunter's men done it. Notice his hurry?"

Hunter was already out of sight. "But—why?" she demanded.

"Gold. It was old Mart Lucas; he discovered the biggest deposit in the Black Hills and he's got a map of it. Hunter wanted it, I reckon."

"But, Spade, are you sure—all this is true?" she asked, bewildered, as they slowed down.

"I'm sure," Spade returned evenly. "So is Bull. But it's liable to be hard to prove."

There was a large crowd ahead, milling in

and out of the alleyways formed by the heterogeneous collection of tents and living quarters. They saw Hunter's white horse, riderless, on the edge of the mob.

Suddenly the press broke, and as they came to a halt, dismounting, Bull's figure could be seen striding through. The people made a way for him, hushed. In his arms he carried a gaunt, limp figure: Lee had a glimpse of silvery white hair and a red, tell-tale stain, and she shut her eyes. Bull was making for his own tent, and behind him followed the preacher and Mike Costigan.

Suddenly Lee saw Hunter leap to his horse, and he spurred the beast violently through the crowd! With Spade at her side, Lee found her way after him. There was a low murmur of excited voices—the voices of angry men.

"Lynch him!" some one cried, and the cry was repeated by a score of husky throats.

"Right now!"

Hunter raised his hand just as Lee got to where she could see what was happening. Tom Neville stood there, considerably disheveled, and he held one of Hunter's cronies a few inches from him by means of a short length of

rope he had twisted about the man's wrist. His gun was leveled at his captive's stomach.

"Lynch him!" came the cry again. Then—

"Here's Hunter!"

A sullen silence fell as Hunter broke into the circle that had formed about Tom. "What's all this?" the sheriff demanded coolly.

Tom looked up steadily. "This is the man who shot old Mart Lucas," he said evenly. "I saw him, and I caught him."

"And we're going to lynch him!" some one cried, to be followed by a roar of approval.

Hunter took a swift look about him, and his eyes lighted at sight of five or six of his deputies, Millar among them, with their weapons drawn. He nodded and turned back to Tom.

"That was excellent work, young man," he said, an ironical note in his calm voice. "Has Lucas died?"

"Not yet," some one answered. "But he's dying. We're goin' tuh send this devil along first to make way!"

With a quick motion of his wrist, Hunter signaled his men. In a second, he and Tom and the prisoner were surrounded by a ring of weapons. Hunter leaned over in his saddle.

"That's enough, Neville," he said coolly. "You can turn the prisoner over to us. While I'm sheriff of Custer—there'll be no lynching!"

There was a roar of anger from the crowd. Tom swore. But he had no choice. This was the law. Corrupt though it might be, he was helpless before it. Reluctantly, while the crowd swayed back and forth with ominous mutterings, he surrendered the rope which held his man.

The captive took a deep breath—the first he had drawn for several minutes. He was nondescript enough in appearance, a heavy, bullying figure of a man, with a short brown beard and thick, predatory lips. His face, though, was white and drawn with fear. He looked up at Hunter hopefully.

But the sheriff paid him no attention. "Take him away," he said quietly to his men. "To my office."

Reluctantly the mob made a way for the deputies. Hunter followed calmly, on his horse. Curses followed his departure, but there was no move made.

"They're not ready—yet," Spade observed to Tom, who came up rearranging his rumpled

clothing. "Hunter'll never forgive you for that."

The boy looked steadily at Lee and her eyes fell first. "It doesn't matter what Hunter forgives," he said between his teeth. "I've got a bigger score to settle than he has!"

Spade shot a swift look at him, glanced at the girl, and then started off toward his tent. Lee turned, started to follow, and then whirled upon Tom, who was standing there watching her. She put out one little hand with an impulsive gesture.

"I'm sorry, Tom," she said quickly. "Will you believe me?"

His eyes shone. He caught the outstretched hand in both his own and pressed it tightly.

"Forgive you?" he gasped in a hushed voice, while his eyes devoured the radiant, wistful loveliness of her. "Good Lord, Lee, don't you know that whatever you do is right—just because you do it? I'm a fool!"

She laughed happily. "You're only a sweet, wonderful, brave boy!" she cried. "And that's enough. Come—let's hurry. We may be able to do something for that poor old man."

In a second she had altered. She was all

woman now, as she strode into the tent occupied by the Three, and Tom's eyes were brimming with devotion as they followed her.

Mart Lucas was propped up on Bull's cot. His eyes were closed when Lee came in, and Mike made room for her. "Get some water," she ordered him, and he hurried out obediently. The Reverend Benson was bending over the white figure on the bed, whispering a prayer in a soothing, gentle voice. In his unconscious state, old Lucas' right hand held tenaciously to the bosom of his shirt.

"They can't have it. . . ." The cracked voice was oddly like a child's—a child unwilling to surrender a toy.

The water came. Tearing a wide handkerchief, Lee wiped gently at the old man's forehead. It was damp with the dew of death. His mutterings ceased. He took a long breath. The stain of red just over his heart was growing wider with each second; there was no hope of staunching the flow of blood. Lee bent closer as the fluttering eyelids opened.

Mart Lucas looked around him dully, from one face to another, and finally his startled eyes came to rest on the minister. He seemed to

understand then that he was among friends. For a moment his eyes closed again; then, as a spasm of pain made him gasp, they opened and fell full upon Tom Neville's face.

"It was you, young fellow, warn't it?—but y' was just too late to save me. He had me, just as y' come."

Now he swept the friendly faces again with an imploring, frantic stare.

"But they didn't get it!" he cried passionately. "It was the map they was after—my find in the hills. They didn't get it!" His fumbling fingers reached into his shirt and drew out a folded paper, worn and dirty, with a circle of blood in one corner now. He held it up.

"Take it!" he commanded. "Fight 'em for it—they know about where it is—but beat 'em! Beat 'em," he fairly screamed. "Beat 'em for me," he ended, his voice weakening perceptibly, "—after I'm—gone!"

His eyes closed again. His breathing had almost stopped. When they fluttered open again, they lighted with consciousness long enough for Lucas to hand the map to Tom.

Then they were glazed, far-off. The withered lips moved—incoherently, at first.

"Gold. . . . But it ain't—the gold. A new land—a new chance—a home. . . ."

That was all. Lee found herself looking up into Tom's steady gray eyes, and she knew that her own were wet. Bull and Mike had turned away and joined Spade in the tent entrance. Benson was murmuring a prayer. Lee and Tom bent their heads.

"From now on," muttered Bull in the doorway, "Hell's loose in Custer!"

CHAPTER XVI

BULL's prophecy had proved correct.

After the burial of old Mart Lucas, a brooding calm settled over Custer. Hunter and his bullies seemed waiting, even slightly apprehensive. Men passed each other in the streets with questioning, belligerent looks, as if challenging each other's stand. The last stragglers of the hegira across the continent, as they arrived just on the eve of the rush, seemed affected with the same feeling.

A careless pistol shot was enough to set men's nerves jumping. It was as though any shot might be enough to set off the conflagration which was so ready to roar loose.

Mart Lucas had been well loved in the section. When Fargo had been but a lonely trading post, numbering for its transient population a half dozen Indians and a few whites beside the trader and his help, Lucas had been known. At intervals he had come in for supplies from

the post, stayed the duration of a day, and then vanished again.

Men had respected him. The new gold region had not been his discovery alone, but he was typical of the men who had found it. And here, after all the years of struggle and waiting, he had been murdered on the very eve of his victory.

No one doubted that the murderer was one of Hunter's crew. The man had been seen too often in the sheriff's company; he had been too promptly rushed off, too, after his capture.

Tom came to be something of a hero in the twenty-four hours that followed the murder. Though he refused to detail his connection with the affair, it was rather well known. Mike Costigan, over glasses of whisky in the Palace, elaborated on it effusively.

Tom had been returning from his rebuff by Lee. Riding along dejectedly, he had allowed his pony its head; and the beast, anxious for its home corral, had taken the shorter way among the tents. Tom was just passing Lucas' tent when he heard a scream, high-pitched, the crack of the old prospector's forty-five, and the louder roar of a rifle. He had leapt from his

horse just as the murderer emerged from the tent to look hastily around.

The same movement which carried Tom from his saddle swung him atop the murderer. Brushing the rifle away as it was half raised toward him, he carried his man to the ground by the very impetus of his attack. Before he had the bully's hands tied, the crowd had been all about them.

But sentiment grew as the hours passed after Lucas' burial. It was Ben Harman, defeated candidate for sheriff, who approached Bull the next day.

"There ain't been a word said about the trial yet, Stanley," he had said in a low voice. "A few of the citizens are getting together. We're going to demand action."

Bull considered. He was not particularly in favor of mob action. Also, he had a certain amount of contempt for the citizens who had taken so much as they already had from Hunter and his gang.

"I'll be there," he promised, however. "What yuh need, though, is a regular organization if you're goin' to beat Hunter. He's got his men trained."

Harman looked swiftly around. "That's comin'," he promised. "Can we count on you and your pals if we form?"

"I reckon," said Bull, turning away shortly. "If there's trouble, we'll be in on it."

But the committee of twenty which waited on Hunter late that afternoon got no reward for their pains. They demanded that the murderer of Mart Lucas be dragged out at once and tried. Hunter met them in the door of the Palace, coolly looking over their grim faces.

"I'm sorry," he said. "We have no adequate jail facilities, you see, and our man—escaped last night!"

He hesitated. The crowd stood stunned. But Hunter continued, waving his hand casually toward a group of armed men who stood on either side of him facing the crowd.

"I'm just forming a posse," he said. "Possibly we'll locate him."

The townsmen understood. In his arrogant motion toward his men, he had seemed to say, "Believe it's a posse or not—as you will. They're here—try and get at me!"

There was a low growl from the men surrounding Ben Harman. Bull shifted forward

easily, waiting. If there was shooting to come, his hand was on the butt of his gun; on either side of him, Spade and Mike stood hopefully. But aside from being ready he would say or do nothing—yet.

The crowd shifted; the muzzles of rifles were elevated uncertainly. Hunter stood smiling easily; but his men stiffened. Some one cursed. Harman raised his hand and shook his head warningly.

"All right, boys," he said, in his steady, dogged manner. "Shootin' ain't goin' to bring him back. We'll get him sooner or later—and the next time, there won't be no need for a jail."

Murmuring, the crowd broke up. Hunter watched them disappear with his supercilious smile. But Jeff Millar, at his side, was shaking his head thoughtfully.

"They're gettin' dangerous, chief. Sooner or later they're goin' tuh bust out."

Hunter turned with a snarl. "Funesti was a fool!" he cried, low-voiced. "I should have let them have him. I told the idiot I didn't want shooting! But them—?" He gave a contemptuous gesture toward the remnant of the

crowd filing up the street. "They'll behave as long as it's necessary. It's only a matter of hours now."

"But we didn't get the map," Millar suggested.

"We know about where it is." Hunter cursed at the thought of his defective henchman. "If we get a head start on the rest of 'em, we'll place a man each at every likely spot. In that way, we're sure to cover the ground. I know Lucas' stake to somewhere within a mile."

Millar nodded softly. "And the head start we get—"

"With the Carleton horses. There's to be no bungling *that* job. They're probably out on the range now. Send Craigen and Rush to me."

The two men found him in his office. Hunter was sitting forward in his chair, his eyes cold, his face tense. The men waited respectfully.

"Things have broken wrong for the last time," he said quietly. "Do you know what you two are going to do?"

Rush shot him a quick look. "The horses?"

"Yes. It won't take more than you two—unless you want to pick up Funesti in case of trouble. He's in hiding up in the gully just

before you get to the bowl where the horses range."

Craigen nodded. "We can use him—there's liable to be shooting."

"I don't want any!" Hunter banged on the desk with his fist. "You must watch whoever guards them—either get to work when he isn't looking, or handle him some other way. If it's Neville, though," he reflected, "take care of him. I'll make it all right. He's in my way."

The two started for the door. "To-morrow afternoon?" Rush said.

"Yes. Any time. Drive 'em over toward the line where the start's to be made. If we can, we'll sneak off the night before."

"Right, chief."

But Hunter stopped them at the door with his outstretched hand. His face was stern.

"I want to warn you again," he said fiercely, his voice low and full of menace. "If you bungle this job, I'm not behind you. Win out, and I'll see that you get more than your share. But if you fail—look out for yourselves!"

At this cool dictum, the faces of the men fell. They hesitated, and then met Hunter's cold stare.

"On your way," he said quietly. "I'll hear from you when it's finished. Either way—it's fair."

Rush grunted. "All right, boss," he agreed. "But if anything does happen, we're goin' t' shoot to kill—and make no mistakes."

"That," Hunter smiled, "is merely good judgment. If you're not going to shoot to kill, you might just as well not carry a gun. And if young Neville gets in your way—well, name your own price for a good job on him—when it's finished!"

The two men agreed and went out.

They were vicious types, both of them. Rush had been a familiar of Hunter's for three years, and yet the sheriff had never let him become a confidant nor particularly close to him. Gunman, rustler, cold-blooded murderer that he was—he was good for only these things, in the eyes of his chief. He hadn't the cold-blooded judgment and crafty loyalty of a man like Millar.

Craigen, too, lacked balance. Neither of them feared anything; perhaps they did not even fear their chief. But it seemed that each realized his shortcomings. With Hunter they had lived

on the fat of the land. He had called upon them more than once for work especially suited to them, and they had complied, knowing well that there was little chance for them in case of failure.

But, on the other hand, they gained more with Hunter than they would have had they pursued their gruesome trade alone. When he struck, it was for a definite purpose; and at other times, he kept them to heel. All in all, they were safer and more satisfied in his employ.

His word was law. To them, if Tom Neville got in their way, his fate was already as good as sealed.

CHAPTER XVII

Bull expected trouble to break out at any minute. He knew the signs. Hunter had come off best in the encounter of yesterday, and yet it had shown the sheriff that he must make whatever moves he planned quickly, for the temper of the townspeople was about to become unruly.

He had not secured the map, at any rate; Bull was wondering if he would try to get it from them. Dubiously, he watched Lee ride out alone that afternoon, in the wake of the Carleton horses, refusing company. He called Tom from inside the tent and pointed after her.

"Go with her," he said briefly.

A frown appeared between the boy's eyes. "It was my job to go this afternoon, anyway," he protested, "but she told me not to. Said she wanted to go alone. Of course, it's no job to watch the string when they're in that bowl—they're safe enough. But—"

"Exactly," Bull finished. "They might be

safe; but she's not safe enough. Saddle up and go on out. If Miss Lee don't like it, tell her it's my orders that she ain't to ride out o' camp alone."

Tom agreed willingly. In less than five minutes he was saddled and dashing off between the rows of tents toward the place where each day the Carleton thoroughbreds were allowed to run and graze.

Bull turned back into the tent, where Spade and Mike were engaged in cutting cards for mythical drinks—to be bought in the future. He sat down heavily and the two looked up, noticed his preoccupied frown, and glanced meaningly at each other.

Bull hadn't been pleasant company for days. Not that he was ever an agreeable companion, but of late his surliness and taciturnity had appeared to increase. The Three had been in momentary danger of their lives for years; so they knew it was not that which perturbed him. Absently he touched the folded paper which he kept over his heart.

With an oath that made the heads of Mike and Spade jerk up quickly, he got to his feet and stared down at them.

"Come on," he said. "Let's saddle up and ride. We're gettin' plumb civilized, sittin' inside o' four walls all day—even if they are tent walls."

There was no word of disagreement. Silently, Spade shuffled the cards and restored the deck to his pocket. Mike went out to where their mounts were picketed and began to saddle. To both of them, Bull's request portended action and they welcomed it.

A few seconds later, without a word being spoken, the Three were trotting calmly out of the limits of Custer. They reached the hilltop where the naked cross still stood outlined against the sky, passed it in silence, glancing down at the new church building in the bottom of the bowl—then rode out along a hog-backed hill to the southward.

The ground took an upward slant here—like a last gesture of defiance before it slid down into the level, unbroken country across which the rush would be made. Bull seemed angling for altitude. He kept climbing, until the smoke and dust rising out of Custer was a gray fog emerging from a collection of gray and brown boxes to the northeast. Then, without apparent

cause, on a high spur that overlooked most of the surrounding country, he halted. Spade and Mike drew up on either side of him, as was their wont.

Bull's eyes were brooding with some inner thought. Across the sweep of green, undulating country to the south of them, they could see the sudden dip in the terrain, and the black, moving dots that were the Carleton thoroughbreds at range. Lee and Tom were nearer, seated unmoving at the top of a small hillock.

"Nature," observed Bull, "is takin' her course."

Mike studied him. "Is that what yuh come out here t' find out, Bull?" he questioned innocently.

Bull looked at him as though the words had been an insult. "No," he said at last, carefully. "But I wanted to watch, anyhow."

He hesitated. A debate seemed going on inside of him. At last, he swung ferociously upon his two companions, turning his mount with a vicious jerk of the bridle until he was facing them. His face set and hard, he dove inside his shirt and brought to light the folded paper he had kept there for so long.

"Yuh might as well know, yuh damned horse-thieves," he growled, "—just what I'm follow-in' in this country. Sooner or later, I'm goin' tuh find *this man.* It don't matter how many sheriffs are between us—he's a-goin' before I die!"

Without a word, Spade and Mike bent over the crumbled note that had been left by Bull's sister. It was hard work to decipher the smudged handwriting—particularly for Mike, who had never gone in for education—but at last they looked up.

"So that's the—*him,*" observed Spade softly.

"Is she here, Bull?" asked Mike Costigan.

Bull shook his head. "I don't know—yet," he replied. "This is as likely a spot as any. I never saw the man. I was away those days—Millie kept the shack goin'. Most o' the time, I was runnin' from sheriffs: remember when we had our hideaway out o' Los Bocas, across the line? It was then."

"An' yuh been lookin' ever since then?" put in Spade.

"Yes." Bull's voice matched his eyes in hardness. "I come back one time—the time we had to scatter after that Juarez affair—sneaked

up to the shack at night, an' she wasn't there. I found this note in the empty *olla* she kept hangin' in the window; she always left a note for me there if she wasn't in. I never saw her. But the man—he must 'a' been a tin-horn o' some kind, and this is the kind o' place to attract him. *Sabe?*"

"Hunter's kind," suggested Spade, in the same soft voice.

"Yeuh, Hunter's kind. But I ain't seen Millie yet. Maybe he got tired, an' left her somewhere—if it was Hunter or one o' his gang. But I'll find out—*I've got to find out!*"

"Maybe he married her," put in Mike hopefully.

Bull turned upon him a look of scorn. "He ain't the marryin' kind—the man who sends for 'em to come. But if he did marry her, it's all right. I won't even show up—she won't want an outlaw for a brother, probably, if things are settled."

There was a space of silence. His eyes quested over the rolling country again, toward where he had seen Lee and Tom the minute before.

"That's why I'm takin' care o' the little

lady," he said, with unknown gentleness in his voice. "I think Millie'd like it if she knew I was doin' that."

Spade was eyeing the distant ridge where they had glimpsed Tom and Lee a moment before. Suddenly, without warning, the far-off crack of two successive pistol shots reached their ears. The Three looked at each other, their eyes narrowed.

Lee and Tom were not in sight. The horses seemed bunched, moving together. There were other figures, indistinct at that distance. With a whispered oath, Bull whipped his thin telescope—as much a part of his equipment as his revolver—from the saddle and drew it to his eyes. A second later he swore.

"Somebody's drivin' those horses!" he exclaimed. "Lee and the kid are riding around the hog-back—looks like they're tryin' to head 'em off."

"It's Hunter!" Mike cried. "You were right, Bull—Hell's startin'!"

In a trice, the telescope was restored to its original position. Without a command, Bull dug in his spurs, shifted the heavy holster at his hip, and was off. The other two tore after

him. They circled the hill on which they were, outlined carelessly against the sky—and then, as they plunged headlong down the long, rolling slope and up the next one, the scene in the bowl beyond was shut from view.

"Spread out!" Bull commanded in his deep-voiced bellow. "Spade, take the pass at the south o' the bowl and hold 'em off."

Without comment on the hazardous task assigned him—nor, perhaps, even a thought of it beyond its execution, Spade swerved sharply and darted off at right angles to the others. As he rode, he loosed a light repeating rifle from his saddle.

Bull and Mike bore on fiercely, reached the crest of the next hill; and before they plunged down again, had a glimpse of Tom and Lee riding side by side for the northern entrance to the bowl. Evidently the rustlers had their own plans made well. Tom seemed to be objecting to the girl's presence; he was gesticulating fiercely as they rode.

Another rifle shot came—before they dove out of sight of the two, Bull and Mike could see Tom's horse shy sidewise, hesitate, and then bear on again as the bullet kicked up the earth

at its heels. Bull had the lead now, and as he mounted the next crest, he was bearing at right angles to his employer and Tom Neville.

Strategically, Bull saw as he reached the ridge, the outlaws had the best of it. They were maneuvering for the southern pass out of the valley, and they had waited for their swoop until Tom and the girl were farthest from that point. It was evidently the boy's purpose now to head them off before they reached it by following the ridge to the point for which Spade was making.

He reined in fiercely just ahead of the two, and Lee brought up with flushed, excited face.

"Get back!" Bull commanded fiercely. "We'll take care o' this—ride back to camp!"

"I'm not going!" Lee retorted with spirit, just as Mike tore up. "I was in this—"

"I've been trying to get her back!" Tom yelled, swinging his mount about. "But I had to follow—"

Bull's face was hard. He swung abruptly on the boy.

"Take her back—that's all," he commanded. "It's your job. We'll take care of these

hombres. Come back when you've got her safe in camp."

"I won't go!" Lee snapped her riding whip against the saddle horn and applied her spurs.

But Bull reached out and brought her mount to his haunches as his big hand fell on the bridle. His voice left no room for controversy as he handed the bridle to Tom.

"Take her back!" he said harshly. "That's orders."

Tom shot him a quick look—then looked at Lee—and his jaw set. "Right!" he exclaimed. "I'll be back, Bull."

Bull, as though the command was already executed, swung his mount; and followed by Mike, rode off. There were two men herding the Carleton horses in the valley, toward the southern pass. But even as those on the ridge moved toward them, another shot came from across the slope, and Bull saw a third rider appear, streaking off toward the other two. At the pace they were going, they would reach the pass before Spade could get there.

This was to be a chase.

Tom, meanwhile, had grasped the girl's bridle and turned his own mount toward town. With

fiery eyes, she jerked at the leather herself. The horse reared.

"Let go, Tom Neville!" she commanded, "or watch your hand."

Her whip was upraised threateningly. Through a cloud of dust, Tom's determined eyes met hers and his jaw set. He shook his head; and with the bridle twisted in his fingers, started toward Custer.

Crack!

The butt end of the riding whip came down on his hand with such force that he had to release his hold. He pulled his mount to its haunches with his free hand and whirled alongside Lee.

"Sorry!" he gritted through his clenched teeth. "But it's got to be done."

Without ceremony, he swung out his left arm and caught the girl around the waist. In a second, she was pulled free of her saddle and slung across his. Furiously she struck at him, to no avail. Tom gave his horse its head, dug in the spurs, and streaked for town. In a moment, as though realizing the indignity of her position, Lee ceased her struggles. Her mount followed.

CHAPTER XVIII

At the pace to which Tom urged his startled mount, it was not long before they were on the outskirts of Custer and hurrying toward the Carleton camp. Lee was silent, inert in his arms; but her silence was more ominous to him than her struggling had been. Fortunately, most of the inhabitants were not in sight along the bypath they had followed, and they reached the camp without having inspired any comment.

Tom let his captive slip to the ground before the wagon, and swiftly he followed her. They faced each other. Lee was white with a rage which she somehow managed to repress; but it was all the more terrible for all that. Tom's face was a mask, though there was a deep pain in his eyes; but it was as though he recognized that having gone so far to incur her displeasure, he might just as well go through with it.

"Will you promise to stay here?" he demanded.

A William Fox Picture. *Three Bad Men.*

Lee drew up angrily. "I'm not promising anything to my hired help," she said coldly. "The minute you turn your back, I'm going to do as I please."

Tom stared at her. His own face was white now. But his jaw was set grimly. Without another word, he swooped down and gathered her in his arms. A few seconds later, he deposited her struggling inside the wagon on a rude chair there. With deft fingers, he unhooked a lariat from the tent-side and caught the loop about her feet, passing it through one of the legs in the chair.

Lee's eyes were blazing as he continued. "I'm sorry," he said, "but I've got orders."

"You'll be sorrier," Lee retorted coldly. "You're fired. Now release me and go!"

Tom looked up with a slow grin; but there was purpose in the set of his jaw. "If I'm fired, I don't have to obey orders," he returned. "Sit still. If you think I'm enjoying this—"

Her hands he caught behind her back, tying the knot as loosely as he could, just enough so that she would be held there for a little time. Then he looked up pleadingly.

"Good God, Lee, do you suppose I'm enjoy-

ing this?" he burst out. "Won't you realize—?"

"I'll never forget nor forgive you, Tom Neville," she broke in impulsively. Her face, when it was turned up to him, was white and wrathful. "If you've finished your—your outrage, please go!"

He stood there for a second, undecided. Before the misery in his gray eyes, Lee turned her head. Then, remembering, he turned on his heel, not to halt before he reached the entrance.

"All right," he said quietly. "I'm sorry, Miss Lee—that's all."

It was bitter medicine. Tom blessed the need of haste and the antidote of wild action which took him in one bound into his saddle and sent him tearing off out through the limits of the town.

He loved her. There had been no doubt of that, since the first moment he had set eyes upon her; but as the days had passed—days of constant association with her sweet, vivid loveliness, the feeling had grown until it was a gnawing pain. Without family, home or fireside, Tom had set his eyes toward the new land

to which they were all going. And in the vision he saw was Lee—always.

Hunter's suave courtship had only deepened his own passion. It made him at last determine that nothing should ever stand between them.

Tom was an easterner who had followed Horace Greeley's advice two years before, when he saw the last of his fortunes wiped out by a minor financial panic. He came of old American stock, of a family which stood high even in the New York of those days—but all those things he had put behind him. In the new, raw world, he had set out to build another life.

The gold rush to the Dakotas had called him, and he had simply cut loose from a cow-punching job in Montana, working a zig-zag way, through casual jobs along the route, up to Custer. With his first sight of Lee Carleton, the careless existence he had followed was ended. Life assumed a definite purpose.

And now—it was all over. For the sake of her safety—for the rustlers would not care where they shot so long as they shot at the pursuit—he had outraged her unpardonably. Tom wondered, as he rode, bent far forward over his steed's flying mane, if a stray bullet

might not find him and end the torture which had just begun.

He didn't care particularly, he told himself. The chance for action and hazard he welcomed. Fiercely his lips drew back over his clenched teeth as he tore ahead, down valleys, over hog-back ridges, through brush-choked gullies, toward the spot where a quick succession of rifle and pistol shots told him that action and danger lay. His hands were gripped on the bridle as though they were fastened on the throat of an enemy.

His pistol he had forgotten. It was physical contact that he craved—muscle to muscle—not the cool range of pistols and rifles. He wanted to meet the rustlers face to face, no matter what the outcome.

He reached the summit of the hill where the ride back with Lee across his saddle had started. There was nothing in sight as he drew to a momentary pause there; but in the next second, there was the echo of a rifle shot from beyond the mouth of the pass to the southward.

Leaning forward, Tom dug in his spurs again, and was off, following the same trail Bull and Mike had taken along the ridge toward the

mouth of the bowl. A gully ran beyond, he knew. So far as he could judge from the direction of the shots he had heard, the Three were fighting a running battle with the rustlers. The horses were probably scattered; certainly if the two bands were near enough to each other for this succession of shots, Hunter's men—for it was to be assumed it was they—were not troubling any longer about the thoroughbreds. They would be looking out for their own lives—and the silence of their pursuers.

Tom topped the pass and pounded down the farther side. Just before he reached the comparatively flat country which ran above the gully to the right of him, he had an instant's glimpse of a single rider whom he did not recognize—a puff of smoke, followed by the sharp cracks of two rifles—and he thought he saw the man throw up his hands.

His eyes narrowed to flaming slits, he spurred on. Finding the edge of the gully, he set his gaze on a clump of trees a quarter of a mile ahead. Beyond there the fighting was—it was open country. The trees choked the mouth of the ravine along which he followed.

Suddenly there was a quick succession of

shots—a loud cry; and Tom leaned far over in his saddle at the sound of pounding hoofs rattling over the stones in the arroyo. With a quick exclamation, he leapt free of the saddle, his pistol neglected at his side.

At the farther end of the gully, he saw two riders, sweeping along side by side, bearing back toward Custer!

He could not see their faces, but he could tell in an instant that neither of them were his friends. Tom scrambled to his feet after his quick leap, his fingers working and his breath coming hard. He was just in time.

He had a glimpse of white, strained faces—they were coming on fast. There was no chance of shooting—no time to aim. From the trees at the mouth of the declivity, a shot hummed through the air.

Suddenly Tom leapt—over the edge that sheltered him, through the air and downward into the gully, his hands outflung. There was a wild cry of alarm and stupefaction. Thus far it had all happened within five seconds from the moment when he had first glimpsed the men.

Impulsive though his wild move had been, Tom had timed it perfectly. His shoulder struck

the first man in the same instant that he threw out his legs instinctively so as to land between the horses. As his first victim swung sidewise under the fury of Tom's impetus, the youth reached out with his free arm and caught the second even as the latter's horse reared in fright.

Down the three came into the rocks together; but Tom was on top. Releasing his right hand, he brought it back and drove his fist fiercely downward. The first rustler sank back with a groan as his head struck the rocks. The second was struggling with a blind fury and had staggered to his knees.

Tom's two hands reached for his throat; but at the same moment, his head snapped back with the impact of his antagonist's fist. He had a momentary glimpse of a pistol, and then his arms closed about the man and the two wrestled to the ground together.

But his first victim, still groaning, was recovering. Tom, out of the corner of his eye, saw him reaching blindly for his holster. Desperately he lashed out with his left fist. The fellow sank back even as his companion struck again.

Things were getting hot in the gully, but Tom's first furious rage had not abated. Again and again he struck, knocking aside the uplifted pistol of the man under him—until suddenly he became aware of the pound of horses' hoofs and a wild yell—from Mike Costigan!

"Hold 'em, kid—here we are!"

The three had followed at the heels of the frustrated rustlers. Now they leapt from their mounts and flung themselves upon Tom's two struggling captives. A moment later, dazed and half blind with his fury, the boy staggered to his feet and gazed about him.

Bull was standing quietly, surveying the end of the chase. Mike had one of the men turned over on his face and he was whipping a lariat about his hands. The second rustler was unconscious: Spade reversed his pistol and stuck it calmly back in the holster. Mike got slowly to his feet and turned to Bull.

"Well, the kid did it," he said. "I left the other one back on the ground over there."

"Dead?" Bull queried.

"Plumb dead. Drilled him right through the heart. He was done before he hit the ground."

Mike sighed over a good job well done, and looked over the two captives thoughtfully.

He nodded, and then crossed to Spade's mount. As he untied the lariat, he was looking about the gully anxiously. With the rope in his hand, he approached Bull—almost resentfully, it seemed.

"Hell!" he grunted. "There ain't no decent tree limb nearer than the other end o' the gully."

"As soon as this hombre wakes up we can walk 'em down there," Spade comforted coldly. "I hate hangin' a man when he ain't awake t' appreciate it."

He turned to Tom Neville approvingly. "Yo're sure some scrapper, kid," he applauded. "But why didn't you shoot 'em from up there and save us the trouble of stretching our ropes?"

Tom's face was savage. "I wanted to get my hands on 'em," he exclaimed. He hesitated. "Miss Lee told me I was fired."

Bull drew down a skeptical eyebrow. Mike shrugged and went over to his man, slipping the lariat's loop about his neck. The fellow was white and fearful.

"Let's get this one finished," he suggested. "I'll walk him down alone, and then yuh can use the same rope over again." He jerked his captive to his feet. It was the gunfighter Rush —bully, bad man and murderer—but at that moment none of the three: merely a man afraid of death and terrified speechless at the form it was taking. It was easy to see that he expected no mercy.

But as Tom shot Bull a swift, questioning look, the leader shook his head.

"Hold on, Mike," he said gravely. "We ain't goin' t' do the hangin'."

"What?"

"Just that." Bull moved forward. "These are Hunter's men, and this calls for a showdown. We're marchin' 'em back to town—and Hunter's goin' tuh give the command that let's 'em swing! *Sabe?*"

Mike was staring at him; Spade merely shot him a swift look and then turned away. But slowly, into Mike Costigan's eyes, perception came. A showdown! He understood the meaning of that. Something—some element of poetic justice in forcing Hunter to give orders for his own henchmen to swing, struck his sense

of the fitness of things. And Hunter would. In Bull's eyes, Mike discerned the resolution. This time, it would either be justice—or guns. And Mike didn't care particularly which it was.

"Good enough," he grunted. He left the noose about the man's neck as he climbed into the saddle and twisted the other end of the rope about his saddle horn. "That hombre's shammin'—jerk him up and let's get goin'."

Without mercy, Craigen—Rush's companion, was jerked to his feet with the rope about his neck. He staggered; blood flowed in a steady stream from a jagged wound in his forehead. But no pity showed on the faces of the Three. Tom got slowly into his saddle and Bull gave the command to start.

CHAPTER XIX

They formed a strange procession as they struck the outskirts of Custer, their horses walking along at a steady, unhurried pace. Bull rode first, on either side of him the two captives, attached to the lariats held by Mike and Spade, just behind. In the rear came Tom.

Small wonder that a crowd formed. It was of respectable proportions before the cortege reached Lillie's outdoor printing office and that individual hailed them for news with the promise of an extra. By the time they were opposite Joe Minsk's Emporium, there was a mob in their wake.

Bull looked neither to right nor left, and the faces of the other two were as grim and set as his own. His eyes were fixed straight ahead; his lips never moved in answer to the questions flung at him from every side. He simply maintained his steady, inexorable pace toward the Palace.

Tom had replied to one or two of the ques-

tions, and the rustlers were already known to most as friends of Hunter. The word quickly spread. There had been a raid on the Carleton horses and the rustlers were captured. Ben Harman came running out, gun in hand, and his eyes met the cold glance of Bull Stanley.

He understood. There was no need for words. Turning, he spoke a few soft words to the men with him, and these darted off to right and left. The showdown was at hand!

Something in the steady, careful pace, the silence of the men about them, instilled deep fear into the hearts of the captives. To right and left they met only hostile faces. Beyond were Hunter's men, but these were keeping out of sight—for the present at least. And Hunter had warned them that there would be no help. Ghastly pale were their faces, and their eyes were haggard with fear.

The crowd, by the time the procession came to a halt in front of the Palace, numbered most of the inhabitants of Custer. It was a silent crowd by then, though soft, rumbling murmurs swept through it at regular intervals, like a low breeze stirring a placid sea just before a storm. It formed a jealous circle about the

six men when Bull drew up facing the entrance of the Palace. Millar was standing there, the sawed-off shotgun in the crook of his arm.

"Get Layne Hunter," Bull commanded. "And get him pronto—or a rope's liable to stretch before he's got a chance."

Millar hesitated, glanced quickly at the set faces of the Three and Tom, and then, without a word, turned back inside the saloon. The crowd waited. Bull and his companions sat their mounts without moving or speaking, until a stir within the saloon announced Hunter's approach.

A low murmur swept through the crowd when he sauntered through the doorway. His keen eyes shot a swift, unrecognizing glance at the two rustlers—and then, without a change of expression they rested upon Bull with an amused, faintly tolerant smile.

"You sent for me, Stanley?"

"I did." Bull's words were close-clipped and harsh. "Me and the boys caught these two rustlers. We left another one out on the range, but we brought these back tuh you."

Hunter smiled. "It's unusual for you and Mike and Spade to be *catching* rustlers, isn't

it, Bull? Things are usually the other way 'round. But now that you're reformed for the moment, I suppose I should thank you—in the name of the town, for your aid to justice."

He turned with cool insouciance to his waiting deputies. "Take care of the prisoners, boys," he said. "That will do, Bull—I'll hold 'em for trial."

There was a growl of dissent from the crowd; but Bull, before any one could speak, had spurred his mount forward until it was between the deputies and his captives.

"Hold on just a minute," he said dryly. "That wasn't the idea at all, Hunter. We've got a poor opinion o' yore jail facilities, so we sorta decided that we'd have the trial right here —and now!"

"But that would be—"

"Nice an' regular," Bull interrupted. "Here's enough citizens to draw a fair jury from right here—an' I reckon none of 'em's got much to do till after this is over. I believe"—Bull turned grimly to the waiting crowd—"I believe I represent the opinion o' the citizens o' this town."

There was a roar of approbation. A slight

pallor stole over Hunter's face as he swept the angry, threatening mob with a quick glance. He had not counted on this. In the event of failure, he had anticipated that his men would be either wiped out, or that he would have the chance to smuggle them off. He couldn't help them now; but that was not all. Before all these people, desperation might make them talk!

Bull pointed to the stalwart Ben Harman, who stood with a silent, grim-faced group of armed men a few yards away.

"Harman there can be judge," he said. "And after the jury's given its verdict, it'll be up to you to execute the wishes o' the court, Mr. Hunter. Up till that time, yuh got nothing to do!"

Hunter hesitated—then he shrugged, avoiding the eyes of the two captives who were watching him hopefully. "All right," he said, as he turned away. "As sheriff, I protest—you're taking the law into your own hands."

"And it's about time!" some one echoed.

It was a matter of scarcely ten minutes to impanel a jury. Ben Harman took his official station seated on top of an upturned beer keg, his rifle across his knees; and behind him stood

five silent men, well armed. Hunter lolled back gracefully a few yards away, tipping his chair against a post of the Palace. The Three, with Tom, stood over the prisoners, aided by a volunteer guard of townsmen.

There was something ominous in the way the women and children were herded out of harm's way across the width of the street by their menfolk.

Hunter watched the preparations with a frown that was not entirely untroubled. "Don't the prisoners have a counsel?" he demanded at last of Bull, who, though silent, was indubitably in charge of the proceedings.

Bull hesitated. It was he who had insisted upon a regular trial in the lawful manner. Now—in the absence of counsel, things might take a different turn. Hunter could protest that such procedure was unlawful. Harman had already sworn himself in. A touch of grim humor was added when little Joe Minsk, proprietor of the Emporium, was elected foreman of the jury. All eyes were upon Bull, when suddenly a voice broke in the crowd and the portly figure of Zach Lillie shoved itself through.

"I'll defend the prisoners!" he announced. "I was a lawyer once—got my papers and been admitted to the bar in Wisconsin."

Hunter nodded agreement. The prisoners looked skeptical but there was no choice. Lillie's assistant—a tall, lean printer, had already started back for some dog-eared law books in the Bugle office. Rapidly the trial got under way.

"The main point is," Lillie assured his clients, "they can't hang you, boys—don't forget that. They can't hang you. Rustlin's not a capital crime in any state, in spite of the habits we've got into."

Even this assurance seemed to give the prisoners little hope. It was greeted with a jeering laugh from the crowd that pressed in. Joe Minsk was eyeing Millar's shotgun and the latter's threatening stare thoughtfully. Without loss of time, first Bull and then the others gave their testimony.

"They was rustlin' horses," Bull said, "and Tom Neville caught 'em while we was chasin' 'em through the gully. That's all."

Word for word, Mike and Spade reiterated this simple statement. No more was needed.

Tom added his testimony quietly. Hunter was watching him.

At the conclusion of this, Lillie got his portly figure up from a box and opened a law book. He scratched his white head thoughtfully.

"I'll have to rest the case," he acknowledged. "The prisoners plead guilty. They don't deny the horse stealin'. But what I wish to call to the attention o' the jury is this—that horse rustlin' is larceny. Grand larceny if you like it, but not a capital crime."

He looked about him importantly, at the unimpressed faces of judge, jury and witnesses—then back to Ben Harman.

"The defense rests with that," he sighed. "We ask for a verdict of guilty and a recommendation of mercy because it's a first offense." Here he faced the jury. "And remember, gentlemen—*you can't hang them!*"

With a brief word from Harman, the twelve men filed into Hunter's office. Silence held the crowd until they returned—exactly one minute and ten seconds later. Joe Minsk eyed Millar doubtfully, fondling the rifle that had been presented him when he took his place on the bench.

The other jurymen held rifles also. They got in place.

Harman got to his feet. "Gentlemen of the jury," he said, "have you reached a verdict?"

Minsk inclined his head vociferously. "We have," he admitted.

The prisoners were eyeing him fearfully. The crowd pressed in, eager to catch every word. Hunter toyed nervously with his riding whip. His old calm was gone. He waited with a tensity that he tried in vain to mask, conscious of the stares of the two rustlers, knowing in his heart that they would speak before the last.

"What is the verdict, gentlemen?" Harman asked.

Minsk took a deep breath, tore his eyes from Millar's shotgun, and replied:

"We find the prisoners guilty, with a recommendation that they be hanged immediately!"

Hunter paled. Not by a muscle did any of the Three show a sign of pleasure. This was not a personal victory, and they had already decided that their two captives were to die, anyway—in one fashion or another. The crowd, holding its breath for a moment, suddenly burst into a wild cheer.

Hunter's men moved closer to their chief. But Bull's hand was on his gun, and Harman's men were only too ready, it seemed, for violence. Millar bent over the sheriff and received whispered instructions. Willing hands assisted the doomed men to the top of an open wagon standing nearby, just under the jutting limb of a big tree. The extreme ends of the ropes about their necks were flung over the stout limb with gusto.

"My men will take care of this," Hunter arose to say. "Deputies, do your duty."

Millar sprang on the moving platform, another man beside him. In a second, before the crowd knew what was happening, there was a flash of handkerchiefs and the two prisoners stood gagged and helpless. Their beaten, haggard eyes fastened upon Hunter; but they would never speak again.

"I tell you, y' can't hang 'em!" Lillie yelled, turning the pages of his law book. "Here—wait and I'll cite instances where a court was overruled. You can't hang 'em!" he continued.

The wagon moved slowly outward, while Hunter watched with a little smile. Nearer and nearer came the booted feet of the two con-

demned men to the edge where they would find only air beneath them. The sheriff's features had relaxed again; he stood watching the proceedings with a look of mild amusement. A score of hands had grasped the wagon tongue and were rolling it gradually out from under the tree.

"You can't hang—!" Lillie stopped short as he reached the paragraph he sought. He whirled on the wagon—

But it was gone. "By gum, they did!" the old lawyer swore.

CHAPTER XX

It was late afternoon before the Three and Tom Neville reached the outskirts of Custer again, riding in a half circle behind the Carleton horses. Bull and Mike had trapped the three rustlers in a ravine about a mile beyond the pass which led from the place where the rustlers had struck. A moment later, Spade had approached from behind and fired at the nearest man, who was aiming at Mike Costigan.

The aim was wide—but Spade's was not. The first of the three rustlers was left where he fell; the others, forgetting the horses, had doubled back on their trail under cover of the firing and made for the gully where Tom had caught them.

The horses were left in the ravine. It was there that they were found, peacefully unaware of the furore they had been the cause of, when their herders came after them following the hanging.

"Hunter's licked," was Bull's dictum. "Which means he's goin' tuh be more desperate

than ever. He's got less t' lose now—and the next time he moves, he's goin' t' stake everything."

"He ain't got such a lot o' time," Mike said thoughtfully. "To-morrow noon the rush starts—at twelve sharp, ain't it? The cavalry's movin' up to the line, I heard."

"Who said that action stops with the beginning of the rush?" Bull demanded. "Custer's here to stay—so is Fargo. Hunter's here for the gold in the hills and the gold in the Palace—and unless he keeps the upper hand, he gets neither."

They were approaching the Carleton camp. Tom Neville was riding along with bent head; he had not offered to join the haphazard conversation which had marked the ride in from the ravine. Now that the excitement of the pursuit and the trial was over, his mind was free to return to his own predicament. Suddenly, at sight of the wagon which Lee used, he jerked up his head and turned fiercely to Bull.

"Look here, I was obeying your orders, Bull, and I'm fired as a result. What are you going to do about it?"

Bull stared at him for a second without replying. "Fired," he repeated. "So she fired yuh, eh?"

"I told you that," Tom glowered. "What'll I do now—sneak off with my tail between my legs?"

Spade and Mike looked at their chief thoughtfully. This was a complication they had overlooked previously and forgotten until this moment.

"Nature," the gambler observed softly, "has a damn funny way o' takin' its course, sometimes—"

"Shut up!" Bull turned on him savagely. Then he swung on Tom. "Didn't I hire yuh for this job?"

"I suppose so, but—"

"Have I fired yuh yet? Well then, wait till I do. I reckon y' can use our tent to sleep in, if I say so. And I ain't got no wages to pay yuh, so how can I let yuh go?"

With this, Tom had to be content. As he had known she would be, Lee was free when they drew up in the yard; but there was no welcoming smile on her face at sight of them. Mike tied up the horses thoroughly. Tom hesitated

before her where she stood on the wagon steps; but she turned away. He went on.

Bull was the only one to stop. "We got the horses, Miss Lee," he announced tentatively and unnecessarily.

"So I've observed," was the cool retort. "That will be enough, Bull, for the present. I wish, though," she added severely, "that if you find it necessary to hire any more hands, you'd make it plain to them that *I'm* their employer—not you!"

Bull hesitated. Then, "Yes, ma'am," he said, and went off. Somehow, he felt absurdly inadequate before her indignation and cool anger. He had intended to put in a word for Tom; but he was completely at a loss. Tom would stay on and they would say nothing. To-morrow the rush began, and there would be too much excitement then for details to receive attention. In some way, things would straighten out. After the incidents of the day, Bull was more than ever determined that nature must take its course with Lee and Tom.

Twice now he had seen the boy fight.

Tom was inside the tent when he came up;

but Spade and Mike Costigan were outside. They were watching the approach of Eric Jonson, who was making for them with earnest bearing. Bull stopped.

"That was good work, this afternoon," Jonson began, and cast a swift look around. "Are you ready to get in on the rest of it?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean—the Vigilantes!" Jonson returned. "We're forming them to-night. Are you fellows with us?"

Bull nodded. "I expected somethin' like that. We're in it now, so we'll go through to the finish."

"Good!" Jonson exclaimed. "All the men in town are meeting up on Bald Top Spur to-night at ten-thirty. We're going to form an organization that'll last till law and order come to this country to stay."

"An' they're leavin' the women folk here?" Mike interposed.

"They'll be safe enough," Jonson returned. "There's a prayer meetin' at the new church to-night—the last meeting before the rush starts to-morrow. All the women are going there."

Bull nodded. It did not seem likely that there could be any danger in leaving the women folk behind in Custer for a few hours. Hunter was not yet desperate enough to make any move such as Mike had hinted at. At least, it was not likely, even though his straits would be desperate now.

"We'll be there," Bull promised. Then he went in to where Tom sat alone, his head bent. The boy looked up hopefully at his entrance.

"Did you—?" He stopped.

Bull shook his head. "No; she's still kinda mad. I didn't say nothin'. But you'll stay on. There's a meetin' to form the Vigilantes tonight, and we'll all go on up there. Yuh won't have t' run across her, an' maybe she'll forget by to-morrow. Women do forget, overnight."

But Tom was not appeased. He sighed. "Sometimes they do," he agreed. "But it's got to be quite a night!"

Bull was staring thoughtfully at the high spur of Bald Top, nearly five miles away but in plain view from here. Behind it, the orange-red glow of the late afternoon sun diffused with the henna of the skies, haloing the hilltop with a sanguine, eery effulgence. His face was expressionless.

"Maybe it will be," he said softly. "In a town like this, any night's liable to be quite a night. Hunter's goin' t' hear of this, and it ain't like him to let the Vigilantes organize under his nose—without some action!"

CHAPTER XXI

"I'LL be all right," Lee said, after the evening meal was finished that night, and the Three had discussed the possibility of one of them staying behind with her. "I'm going along to the services with Mrs. Jonson, and there can't be any trouble there."

Tom was not present. At Bull's suggestion, he had absented himself from the meal. He was to meet the Three later at the Palace, from whence they would proceed to Bald Top. Meantime, he was to try to discover if Hunter had got wind of the proposed organization.

If Lee noticed his absence, she gave no sign of it. But she had been unusually repressed during the meal. She looked up now as Bull got to his feet.

"Did you—have those men punished?" she faltered. "I heard something, and wondered what happened. . . ."

"We had 'em hung!" Bull returned coolly.

"But they was tried first!" he hastened on, at her shocked look. "Tried nice an' proper, with a full-sized jury and all the fixin's." Idly he continued as he rolled a brown paper cigarette. "We wouldn't 'a caught the two of 'em if it hadn't been for the kid. He tackled 'em both at once, bare-handed, an' brought 'em down."

Mike looked up at him. "He sure did," he sighed.

But there was no sign of interest in Lee's face, which was bent over the hastily built table. An embarrassed silence fell upon the group. At last she looked up.

"Mr. Neville loves to fight—that's evident," she said coolly. "But you'd better be going, if you plan to reach Bald Top in time. I hope you won't be party to any violence that starts there."

"This ain't that kind of a party," Mike assured her, as the Three got up to leave.

There was no more said. It was quite dark by then, and they saddled in silence. Eric Jonson met them at the road and the four started in to town together. Along the way, silent, grim-faced men passed them, nodded without

words, and continued. They were all going in the same direction and there was not one but was armed. A silence had fallen over Custer—a grim silence that betokened violent events in the offing.

Bull, riding a little in advance, halted before the Palace. A rude bulletin board had been erected there, and he saw the Reverend Colvin Benson with his back turned, tacking up a notice. Scarcely five feet away, Layne Hunter leaned against a post, watching the operation with his sneering smile.

Benson turned as Bull drew up, unaware of being watched, and his serene features changed at sight of Hunter. The latter asked with a half-sneer:

"Meeting to-night, parson?"

"There is, Mr. Hunter," the minister said quietly. "I'd be very glad to see you there, if you'd come."

Hunter laughed outright. One or two of his bullies in the doorway joined him. Bull watched with a frown. But Benson was unmoved.

"There's going to be a collection taken—for Mart Lucas's little daughter," he said quietly. "She's down in Fargo, and penniless. Perhaps

you'd like to do your share now, even if you don't go to the meeting."

Hunter straightened with a curse.

"No, I wouldn't!" he exclaimed. "Get that straight. And there'll be no talk of a collection in the Palace, either. There's no place in this town for snivelling old birds like Lucas—nor for your kind, either. Stick to your church, parson—while you've got a church to stick to—and leave the rest of us alone."

Benson nodded. He seemed unwilling to take affront, though Hunter was intent upon insulting him.

"Very well," he said quietly. "The church is here, and it will stay. It's more enduring than the Palace, my friend."

He started off; but Hunter, angered now by the man's indomitable calm, whirled and caught his arm. His face was furious.

"It'll stay—just as long as I want it to stay!" he cried. "When I get enough of you and your snivelling hypocrites, I'll drive you and your church clean out of this country. Remember that—and stay where you belong!"

The calm suddenly dropped from Benson. Under the lash of the words, he straightened up

like a towering figure of courageous righteousness. His mild old eyes flamed. With a quick jerk, he shook off Hunter's hand.

"Where I belong?" he repeated. "I belong wherever God or his children have need of me—and that's here. Drive me out of Custer if you can—you can't drive out the church, for that belongs to God, not to me." He hesitated; the colossal inner courage of the man made him seem inspired.

"And if you think you're strong enough to tear *that* down—try it!"

Hunter's hand clenched fiercely on his riding whip. A dark figure emerged from the crowd in the doorway, and suddenly Tom Neville was between the minister and the sheriff. He faced the latter coldly.

"You had something to say, Hunter?"

Hunter took a step backward. As the deputies in the doorway moved uncertainly, Bull gave his horse the spur. The others followed. Hunter looked up at him and went white. There was no move—nothing was said. Mike sat his mount grinning thoughtfully—even hopefully.

"You goin' somewheres, parson?" Bull asked softly. " 'Cause if yuh are, we'll ride along

with yuh. There's a heap o' snakes in this country, an' you ain't carryin' a gun."

"Thank you." The minister mounted his horse and Tom followed him. Half a score of eyes watched them as they rode up the length of the street. It was not until they came to where a narrow path branched to the left and led toward the church in the valley that Benson drew up. He looked from one to the other of his escort.

"I can go on from here," he said quietly.

"But suppose they're waiting for you—?" Tom began.

The old man shook his head. "If I had thought of those things, my boy, I would never have come to Custer," he said. "I am in the hands of God." He hesitated. Then in a lower voice, "You men are all going up to Bald Top, I suppose?"

Eric Jonson nodded. "Something's got to be done, parson."

Benson shook his head. "I believe in prayer," he said. "Organization means violence—and bloodshed. And there are always more than yourselves to consider: innocent folks. Won't you come to the meeting—and pray?"

He was looking at Bull. The latter hesitated before lighting a cigarette he had just completed.

"Not to-night, parson," he returned grimly. "Prayin's all right, I guess—but I'll wait till after the shootin'. Then, whatever happens, I'll know that nobody can come up behind me while I'm on my knees!"

The minister shook his head; and with a brief word, turned and went off. Silence enwrapped the little group for a moment. Bull turned for a last glance back toward the Palace.

"Reckon they ain't gonna follow him," he decided. "Let's get goin'."

Wordlessly, they took up their way, the two, as always, on either side of Bull, and Tom Neville bringing up the rear with Jonson. In the dark that enveloped the country outside of Custer, they were aware of other men passing, some hurriedly, others at the same pace as themselves. Some were afoot, plodding a steady, relentless way toward the same destination.

At length the dim light of the stars was augmented by the rising of a cold yellow moon. It stood for a moment just behind the bald knob

of the hilltop where the rendezvous had been made, outlining a high pole which had been placed there. As the Three came nearer, this took shape—and then suddenly, from the summit of the pole, a white light burst forth. It shone all over the countryside until the first flare died, when it subsided into a steady flame.

Behind them, as they crested a rise, Custer was enveloped in the blanket of night and darkness. On the main street a few lights shone, but even these were feeble. The Palace was the brightest of them all. But silence seemed to have come upon the town, too. In the valley, the men plodding along the trail could see the lighted windows of the new church shining like beacons.

The Three topped the last high ridge before they descended into the valley out of which Bald Top Spur arose. There were more men now, unspeaking, even among themselves. They fell into line. To the westward there were beacon fires—the picket stations of the cavalry encamped across the line until the morrow.

All along the border these fires were spread, mute warning against trespassers. To-morrow that dark plain beyond would be alive with

movement and life. To-morrow the rush began. But to-night, it was all silent. Even nature seemed waiting, pulsating in silence before the epic events that were in the process of birth.

CHAPTER XXII

Layne Hunter, after the six men left him, stood for a long time watching their departing backs as their horses walked the length of the main street. He saw them indistinctly when they halted at the edge of town. As he stared, the knuckles of his right hand showed white with the fierce grip he had of his whip. Jeff Millar's voice was in his ear:

"That parson's turnin' off, chief," he suggested; and when Hunter turned, stroked the stock of his shotgun meaningly.

Hunter stared at him for a moment uncomprehendingly, so absorbed was he in his own passion; then he snarled:

"No!" His lips twisted. "It's about time, Jeff, that we stopped murdering old men and got down to some action. Tell all the men to stand by to-night—there's something happening."

Millar nodded and hurried away. Hunter

stood staring off into the darkness that had swallowed the Three and Tom Neville. He was aware that some unusual movement was toward, and he could guess that it portended no good for him. His power in Custer—and the county which would surround it immediately the rush began—was waning, and it needed strong remedial measures. If the decent element of the place ever organized, as they had shown symptoms of doing that very afternoon, he was on the road to defeat.

In all the streets there was no sign of life. The prospect outside the Palace was depressing in its silence. Hunter swore softly to himself, struck the butt of the whip across his palm, and turned inside.

Here hilarity reigned, as always. The night had begun early. The bar was crowded by a loud-voiced, laughing gang of men. Pistols and rifles were obviously displayed. Hunter stood surveying the scene disapprovingly.

The balcony was well filled. Men were running up and down the stairs thereto with drinks on trays. Hunter watched them. Millar was moving in and out among the crowd. It was a scene of bustle and activity, of life and excite-

ment. All the men in the Palace, with practically no exceptions, were his own men; and these, as though sensing a freedom from restraint in being with their own kind, were letting loose. Drinks were flowing across the bar like an unending river.

But Hunter's eyes were brooding, angry, and his face was hard. Here he was master, and yet —at this moment, he suspected, events were moving; events which would eventually dethrone him.

He caught sight of Melville, the gambler, as he entered and looked around. Hunter nodded shortly; but Melville, upon seeing him, started across the room. He seemed excited.

"What's going to happen, Hunter?" he demanded. "What are you going to do?"

Hunter raised one expressive eyebrow. "I was just wondering," he replied. "Why is it necessary for me to do anything, particularly?"

"Do you mean to say you haven't heard?" Melville demanded.

"What?" The question was like the crack of a whip; in it were all of the sheriff's forebodings and secret fears.

"Vigilantes!" Melville repeated the word

like an oath. "Didn't you see them all leaving town to-night?"

"Vigilantes . . . !" Hunter was staring straight ahead, his eyes wide. So his fears had been correct—though he had not voiced even to himself this dread name. "Is that what they're doing?"

"Out at Bald Top. I was invited," Melville ran on. "They didn't seem to know just where I stood." He hesitated, searching his companion's expressionless face. "What do we do?" he asked at length. "Start movin'?"

Hunter stared at him. "With the rush beginning to-morrow?" he demanded. "Of course not!"

He gripped Melville's arm harshly. "This is bad, but it might be worse. We're not licked yet—though God knows what we can do to head them off."

"Head them off? Do you realize they'll outnumber you three to one?" Melville cried aghast.

"I know it." Hunter bit his lip. "There's more ways than one, though, Melville. Stick around here. When you see me running out of Custer, that's the time to run—not before!"

But Hunter, when he left the gambler, seemed to have no definite purpose in view. If anything, he wanted to be alone, to think. He dropped into a chair against the wall.

Inside him anger seethed like a living volcano. His grip was loosening. For the first time in his career, he had found his own calm smoothness and crafty strategy matched with strategy that was more powerful than his own; and where in the past he had been wont as a last resort to depend upon brute force, he was now being met with force. And his enemies were making the first move!

He had always a fine contempt for others. He had contempt now for the inhabitants of Custer. How far would they dare to go? he asked himself. How far would this sudden organization —the result, no doubt, of the victory for law and order which Bull had maneuvered that afternoon—carry them? In their first flush of triumph they were rushing on.

Hunter's eyes narrowed. They had to be met —at once!

He knew Bull; he knew the Three. Hunter was not a fool, and he had been aware from the first that these men were dangerous. As

desperate as he was himself, they had neither family nor tie. Gun-fighters, gamblers with life and death, they were men like himself—if anything, more resolute and to be feared in a final throw.

But the others— Until the Three came, Hunter had been master. Even now, it had been Bull, backed by the six-guns of his two partners and the boy Neville, who had called his hand. The rest were of little consequence. If they met with force and brutal violence, they would shrink, he was certain. He had ruled before by taking the initiative. If he took it now, before the organization of the Vigilantes was well established, there was still time.

At all events, Hunter had no choice. He had to stake everything on a final throw, or else let events take their course and face what was, for him, defeat.

"Layne. . . ."

His head jerked up with annoyance at some quality in the soft, tearful voice. Even before he had recalled himself to the present and recognized Millie, he was angry with the interruption.

It was a different Millie now, though. The

cool, clean calico which the girl had worn, had disappeared. She looked quite like the other girls of the Palace, in short skirt, low neck, and high-heeled slippers over silken-clad feet. Only for her eyes—they, and her drooping, wistful mouth. Millie had never been able to paint on a smile. Even the Palace had not done that for her.

Behind her, Hunter saw one of his men leaning against a post, watching with a sneering smile. Millie's shudder as she glanced over her shoulder told him the story.

"What do you want?" he demanded abruptly.

She came closer to him, as though afraid that some one might hear, and put out one hand in a little, pleading gesture.

"Layne, can't you see that I can't stand it? I don't want to bother you—but I have to. There's just one thing I want to ask."

He sat back impatiently. "Well . . .?"

"Let me get away from here," she exclaimed. "I don't ask anything, except that you'll let me go. Please—just that, Layne!"

He laughed. "And if I said yes," he demanded. "Where do you suppose you'd go?"

She hesitated. "To Mister Benson," she said at last. "He'll take care of me. He'll send me somewhere where no one will know—"

Hunter cut her short. With an oath he gained his feet and his whip cracked on the top of the table.

"That's enough!" he cried, in a tempest of rage. "I've heard all I want to of that snooping preacher. Jeff!"

The crowd in the barroom were silent at his voice. Millar edged out and hurried across the room. The others waited tensely, watching. Behind the bar, even the bartender waited, a bottle poised in the air.

"That preacher again!" Hunter exclaimed, when Millar came up. "Jeff, the showdown is on—and Millie's shown me the direction we're to go. If they want to call our hands, we'll show 'em. The church is first!"

Millie stifled a gasp.

"The church," gasped Millar fearfully.

But Hunter's rage had gone beyond the limits of reason.

"Nothing less!" he exclaimed. "Out at Bald Top they're forming an organization of Vigilantes. We're going to meet them the same

way—gun to gun—only we're moving first. The women and children are all at the services."

"But what—?" Millar was still uncomprehending. The girl listened wide-eyed, rigid with terror.

Hunter's face was a livid mask of fury. "We'll attack the church!" he cried. "Burn it down! Then when those hounds come back from organizing they'll have something real to think about."

He leapt to the top of the table. The crowd had already pressed in to hear his words. Excitement swept the room like an electric current loosed. Hunter waved his whip.

"If they want a showdown," he exclaimed, "let 'em have it!" He swept the waiting, expectant faces. "Did you hear me?—It's the church first—right now!"

There was an instant recoil. Hardened as they were, the men showed an instinctive fear on their faces. But Hunter's lips were drawn back from his teeth like an animal's; his slender figure was taut with rage. He looked like a madman—and yet an inspired one.

"You're afraid?" he sneered. "Mike, pull out every cork—the drinks for to-night are on

ne. Afraid!" he cried again. "Do you know you'll have something real to be afraid of in a few hours? It's either a quick move and victory—or death with the Vigilantes!"

At the mention of that name, the crowd stirred. Anger pulsed on the strained, rough features of Hunter's men.

He laughed wildly at the effect of his lashing words.

"Yes," he sneered, "—the Vigilantes. You're afraid—yellow, all of you. But you'll fight now, or be beaten for good. Go on over and get some liquid courage in you, you swine. Half an hour—and then we start. Get busy!"

There was a roar of anger. But no one made a move toward Hunter as he leapt from the table. Standing there, he had been like a lion tamer, whipping his subjects with the lash of his voice and the scorn of his eyes, to his will. There had even been something magnificent about his contempt for them and his own ruthlessness.

"Come on!" Millar cried. "The drinks are on the house!"

He made for the bar, and the crowd followed eagerly. If the liquor had flown before, it was

A William Fox Picture.

PRAYER MEETING IN THE NEW SETTLEMENT.

Three Bad Men.

a veritable deluge now. Whisky barrels were placed on top of the bar, spigots placed, and tin cups underneath them took the place of glasses. Instead of the wild revelry of a moment before, there was a grim hysteria in its place. Voices were thicker—coarse. Harsh whispers croaked instead of wild laughter. But in a moment the scene was a bedlam. There were cheers.

Hunter had won.

"The church!" some one cried, and the cry was echoed. "After to-night, there'll be just one boss in Custer!"

The girls of the Palace, forsaken, stood in a little group on the balcony. One of them, white-faced, golden-haired, came down to where Millie stood and caught her shoulders.

"Come away, kid," she whispered. "You can't do anything with Hunter—and the way he is to-night, he's liable to kill you if you try."

"But—" Millie turned a pallid, frightened face toward the one girl who had befriended her. Lou Nason was hard, broken, inured to her life and not dissatisfied with it; her beauty was the enameled beauty of a puppet; but she was still a woman. "Did you hear what they

said?" Millie gasped, stunned. "The church! They can't do that, Lou—they can't!"

The other girl shook her head. "They can do about what they want, I guess, kid," she said gravely. "Anyhow, we can't stop 'em. If you'd known Layne Hunter as long as I have—"

Wild turmoil ruled inside the Palace. Hunter stood back watching with cynical eyes. Suddenly Millie broke from the sympathetic hands on her shoulders, and ran to him.

"Layne, you can't do this!" she cried. "Not the church—"

He looked at her. Her hands were clasped, pleading. Her red lips trembled ungoverned. He gave a harsh laugh and brought up his whip.

Crack! It came down across the side of her face. He laughed again at the stunned, frightened surprise which stamped her features before she tottered and fell. Then he walked away. The men about him had watched with amusement the little scene. Now their interest died as they saw Lou cross to where the girl lay.

Millie was not unconscious. She looked up

out of beaten, dead eyes into the understanding eyes of her companion.

"I'm going—going to the church. Lou," she whispered, "somebody's got to warn them—before it's too late."

The other girl's restraining hands could do nothing. In a moment, Millie had leapt to her feet, unnoticed by the milling throng, and slipped quickly through the side door of the Palace. Lou, after a quick, apprehensive look around, followed.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE heads of the congregation were bowed. Inside the little church in the valley there was quiet, except for the voice of the preacher. Here were the women of the long train of immigrants, the women and the children. Only a scattering of men were present. These were the folk to whom the morrow meant the dawn of a new life—a home in a new land—peace.

Thoughts of strife were far from these folk.

"Grant that the morrow become but the dawn of happiness, the dawn of toil repaid, that in this new land we may all have the courage to go on with the work of our hands and Thy will. . . ."

The minister's gentle voice fell like a cool benediction over the bended heads. "Amen," came in a low whisper.

There was the rustle as the prayer ended; the congregation straightened. The Reverend Colvin Benson was smiling kindly. The rule

of force, he had said, would end with the morning.

Suddenly there was the quick sound of horses' hoofs. A moment of silence followed as a mount was heard to draw to a wild stop outside the church door. Benson looked up inquiringly as that door was flung open and Millie stood in the threshold.

She looked incongruous in that setting, with her tawdry dress, the painted cheeks that could not hide her pallor, and her over-red lips, as she stood there, sweeping the staring faces with a mute look. Suddenly, catching sight of the minister where he stood at the farther end of the room, she broke through the staring women and ran into his arms, which had been outstretched in a little gesture of welcome. They scarcely heard the second horse that came to a sliding stop outside.

"They're coming!" Millie cried hysterically. "Hunter's men—they're coming here!"

There was an instant cry of alarm from one of the women. Babies were pressed closer instinctively to their mothers' breasts. A hush fell upon the assemblage.

"What do you mean?" the preacher demanded. "Tell me, Millie."

He looked up to see the second girl in the doorway. Lou was scarcely noticed as, white-faced, she progressed down the aisle.

"Hunter and his men!" the girl replied. "They're going to attack the church while the men are away."

"They're coming," Lou cried—"now!"

They were surrounded immediately by a chattering, fearful crowd of women. Lee Carleton was there, but she was silent. She looked quickly about her; and then, the second girl at her side, rushed to a window that looked back toward the village. Benson joined her and the crowd followed.

"Good God—look!" It was Lou's voice.

There was a gasp of fear. The sight that met every eye was awe-inspiring, fearsome. For a moment, the terrified congregation could only stare in stupefied horror.

The church was at the bottom of the rolling ground which swept south of the western end of Custer, where a long collection of prairie wagons had stood, the horses tethered nearby. A moment before that line had been in deepest

darkness. Now, suddenly, it was ablaze with light. A score of torches wavered to and fro, and in their light, a number of horsemen could be seen, brandishing weapons wildly, hallooing and shouting, their mounts rearing and stamping. As they watched, a gasp of terror came like a wave from the group in the church. One of the wagons burst out suddenly in a red sheet of flame!

On the heels of it, another wagon joined the conflagration. The minister turned to his congregation. In spite of all, he was still calm with a stoical resignation, though his deep eyes burned with anxiety for his flock.

"We must not be afraid," he said. "They will stop soon—"

"Look—!"

The word was a shriek of terror. Frozen with fear, even the minister gasped at what they saw. Five wagons were alight now, throwing the wild scene into bold relief as the horsemen galloped to and fro—

But two of the wagons were moving downhill, straight for the church!

As the cumbersome vehicles started, there was a wilder yell from the outlaws, and half a

dozen of them started off down the slope. Lumberingly, the two wagons retained the course that had been set. Blazing like crippled meteors they bore on through the darkness of the hillside, their red glare painting horses and shouting men a lurid hue—straight for the building where the women and children waited in terror. Even as they watched, the other wagons were pushed off, and the entire crowd started off for the church.

Stark terror held the women rigid. White face peered into white face. There was a cry of anguish and a woman fainted. Lee hurried to her side. In the same instant, there was the crack of half a dozen rifles, and the lead pellets rattled against the rough boarding like hailstones.

"Run!" some one cried. "We'll die here in the flames."

Benson stretched out his hands. "We can't run!" he told them. "No, no—you must stay. They're mad—as soon as you leave this building, they'll shoot!"

There was no longer any doubt of that. The rifle fire, as the raiders swept on, was growing hotter. They had formed a circle now, and

Indian fashion, the yelling, hooting mob were going round and round the church structure. Still the wagons lumbered on; but the windows were no longer safe. A woman had already been struck in the arm with a stray bullet. They huddled together in the rear.

Suddenly the first of the flaming wagons struck with a mighty crash that sent up a shower of sparks, and the blaze vomited in through the open window.

"Where are our husbands?" some one moaned.

At Bald Top—five miles away! But would they see the blaze—would they know—in time?

The second wagon struck now. Flames licked along the wall where the women had been but a moment before. Suddenly the girl called Lou leaped to her feet.

"Somebody's got to ride for the men!" she cried. "I'm going."

The women stared at her uncomprehendingly. Benson shook his head.

"You can't!" he cried. "It's death out there—you'd be killed before you started."

"And suppose I was?" Lou's lips were twisted, but she gave a little gesture toward the

women with babies all about her. "What do I matter—alongside all—this?"

They were still staring at her—this painted woman, disbelieving the evidence of their ears. But Benson would not hear of it.

"You can't go!" he repeated. "They'll kill you. You must stay here—"

But, with a hard laugh, Lou had made her choice. She leapt with one lithe bound through the nearest window. There was a concerted gasp of amazement. Benson rushed to the window after her—he jumped through, ignoring the hail of bullets that suddenly concentrated on that point.

A horse stood near by, panic-stricken. Through the maze of smoke and fire, he saw the girl grasping its bridle, trying desperately to mount. He cried out—but the cry was drowned in the torrent of sound.

Suddenly, just as he reached her side, she had gained the saddle. She turned to laugh—flung out one hand carelessly—then—

Straight into the preacher's arms she fell, tumbled sidewise from the saddle, a look of astonishment and wonder on her painted fea-

tures. He caught her as the horse reared and broke free.

As he clambered back through the window, the still form in his arms, a dozen shots rattled against the sash, but none struck. Amid a dead silence, the firing and the flames forgotten, the women followed him to the altar where a silent cross stood. At the foot of it, he stretched the dance hall girl.

Her golden, reddish-tinted hair had fallen free and hung down over her shoulders. Her white, rounded arms were like marble as she lay inert. Above her, Millie wiped away her tears. The round, reddish stain in the girl's breast blended with the scarlet of her gown. In the silence, Lee stared down, her lips parted before something great and fine that she could not voice.

The preacher was murmuring a little prayer. "Greater love hath no man. . . ."

But Lee, as he stared, had forgotten the prayer. Looking at those white shoulders, at the golden, falling hair, the cross above, she could think only of the immortal Rubens' canvas, "The Descent from the Cross." It needed only the Saviour's pierced foot above the still

form to make of Lou, the dance-hall girl, the sainted Magdalen.

"I—*I*'ll try now," Millie faltered, as the minister looked up.

But Lee caught her in her arms fiercely. "No, no!" she cried. "You can't! It's madness to try—now."

And it was. The raiders were sweeping nearer with each circling movement; their bullets were piercing the thin walls with each volley, in hot showers. Amid it all, their shouts and cries mingled with the roar of the flames like the yelling fiends of inferno.

All the burning wagons rested against the walls now. Benson was herding the women into the small room in the rear, where it was more quiet. On that side, the flames had not yet begun. But at any moment, the raiders might cease their circling tactics and break through the hell they had created outside. Any moment might be the last. A low moan broke from the center of the crowd. Benson raised his arms.

"We must pray," he said softly. "Like the Israelites in Egypt, it is all that is left us now."

CHAPTER XXIV

A GREAT circle of torch-flares made of the scene on Bald Top that night one of lurid, striking grimness. Inside the circle, the men who had come from Custer still sat their horses. There was something resolute even in that fact which struck the note of determination. Every man carried a rifle, and most of them had pistols as well. It was on the outskirts of the big crowd that Bull halted.

The organization was complete. To a man, they had voiced a deep-throated roar of approval to Ben Harman's proposal that they consider themselves an organized body of Vigilantes, the organization to last until law and order in town and county made them no longer needed. There had been no controversy, either, over the election of their leader. At another deep-voiced roar, Ben Harman took the platform.

"The danger we must face mostly," he had told them, in his quiet, determined voice, "—is

misuse of the power we shall wield. Before making any move at any time, we must meet here and have the consent of the majority of our members. Individual excesses shall be punishable—we must work only together, and never use the name of the Vigilantes for private quarrels. In other words, each and every member here to-night is punishable for any crime on the same basis as outsiders!"

There had been a murmur of disagreement from the hotter spirits in the crowd at this dictum. But it was quickly downed. Reason asserted itself. Bull had nodded his approval of this sanity.

The meeting was nearing its close. "That is all, then," Ben Harman said. "Tomorrow the rush begins. A series of smoke-signals will be arranged, so that we can meet within an hour in any emergency."

Tom Neville was not listening. His thoughts preoccupied with Lee and her dismissal of that afternoon, he had been looking back toward Custer most of the evening. Now his gray eyes narrowed at sight of flames to the north of them. He nudged the man next to him. It was Eric Jonson.

"What are the fires?" he whispered.

Jonson stared with a puzzled frown. Suddenly, on the breeze, as Harman's voice paused for a moment, there came the far-off report of two rifles. At Tom's exclamation, Bull turned. It was then that they saw!

The flames were moving! One—two—three of them, started off. Down the slope moved the burning wagons.

"The church is there!" Jonson cried, and at the terror in his voice, the crowd stirred.

From the hastily erected platform, Ben Harman was staring. A silence fell. Into it, like the clarion of a bold alarm, came the far-off sound of a succession of rifle shots. Meanwhile, the flames from the burning vehicles were lighting the heavens, and the hills rolling away from the church were painted a red hue.

For a moment no one moved. Then a cry startled them.

"It's Hunter—!"

Harman shot off his rifle and gained attention. His face was a mask.

"Steady!" he cried. "Something's up down there. Move together. I'll take the center of the line—Bull Stanley—you're in charge of the

right. Jonson, take the left. Spread out!" he cried. "—And follow me!"

With one leap, he gained the saddle of his horse, spurred through the congested crowd; and without pausing, started down the hill. With a roar, the Vigilantes got under way. A long line of torches flared and painted the hillside that a moment before had been enwrapped in silence. Grim-faced, wordless, rifles gripped tightly in horny hands, the Vigilantes broke into a fierce gallop in the wake of their leader.

Bull had paid scant attention to the command which gave him charge of a section of the line. He was not a soldier; he had no wish to lead. He knew that his three companions were with him, however, when he started. Fighting, to him, was not a mass movement: it was entirely a matter of the six-guns of his two partners, which years had taught him to rely upon.

On through the night the Vigilantes tore—down the long slope from Bald Top, through brush-choked gullies, pounding into and out of ravines, up and down the sloping hills, cresting them, pausing and then charging on—and the flickering torch-flares lighted their way until they seemed like a host of vengeance sweeping

down from the very heavens. Nearer and nearer they came, until the rattle of rifle shots made each man lean forward more grimly silent than before, and spurs dug more harshly into the flanks of their mounts.

They swept on like the wind itself, a wave of fury and silent destruction, until the last hill was topped and the line lingered on its crest. A roar of mingled fear and fury ascended to the heavens.

Ben Harman's hand was raised in frenzied command. "Now!" he cried, his voice drowned in the awful tumult. "Into 'em!"

The scene beggared description. Its very violence hid part of its fury. Men and horses, rifles and flames were all integral parts of the nightmare that confronted them. The raiders' circle had tightened, flashes of flame stabbing the night as they closed in. The church was ablaze on every side, and through the sightless, empty windows there was no sign of life.

Without command, as the Vigilantes swept down, there came a sudden wave of flame from a hundred rifles.

There was a cry—the circling stopped—alarm gripped at the throats of Hunter's men.

Again came that wave of flame, and more than a dozen of them dropped in their tracks or were dragged off by startled horses. For a moment there was utter confusion. Beasts and men were entangled in the fear that gripped the raiders.

But relentlessly the men from Bald Top swept on, their eyes on the flaming church before them. Nearer and nearer they came, to be met with a half-hearted volley from Hunter's crew. None of the shots struck. Panic-stricken, the men from the Palace attempted to flee.

But it was too late now for many of them. Such as could, had already darted off, and there was a long string of fleeing horses and men charging off to the eastward. Then, like the avenging hosts of Valhalla, the Vigilantes struck.

There was a roar—a tremendous, indecipherable undercurrent of sound that mingled with the steady rifle fire—shrieks and cries, deadly, red-painted tumult. Up and down the torches bobbed. Hunter's men scattered, but the Vigilantes pursued. There was no mercy.

White handkerchiefs tied about the upper

arms of the avengers distinguished them from the raiders. Like rats they were hunted out and slain. To right and left, the harvest of fury was consummated, in a deadly, voiceless silence that was part of the roar of the flames.

Men were already leaping through the burning building. They were already emerging, pushing out women, carrying children half suffocated by the smoke and flames. But Bull, with Mike and Spade, rode on. Tom had already darted off for Lee, and Bull had seen him go. He was content; but for him there was killing to be done.

Bull would never notch his gun for the score of that night. Such of Hunter's men as came within range of the charging Three were butchered like cattle. Silent, with the remnant of the Vigilantes riding side by side with them, they made a wide circle, cleaning up what few of the raiders still lingered in the dark, dead, wounded or dying. The wounded were at least spared their misery.

At last Bull halted, automatically stuffing cartridges into the hot chamber of his smoking pistol. The other two drew up while the Vigilantes swept past them with the lust to kill.

"Reckon they're all out o' the church, huh?" the leader grunted.

Spade nodded. The roof of the burning building seemed about to collapse. The walls were red, like crisp paper, sagging inward, except on one side. But in a big circle, the survivors stood. As they looked, the Reverend Benson burst hatless and unfrocked through the flames with a child in his arms. He was smiling, and two of the men beat at his clothing where it had caught fire when he deposited the child in its mother's arms.

"I don't see the little lady," Mike grunted.

"The kid's got her," replied Bull without anxiety.

"Anyhow, I'm goin' t' see," Mike said. "There ain't no more killin' to be done," he apologized with a sigh.

He circled the building. The Vigilantes were moving about, finding their people. Spade spurred his mount forward and followed Mike. The latter broke through the flames and found a window. He stopped at the sill, gasping at the scene which met his eyes in the little rear room where Benson had herded his congregation.

The room was emptied—except for two. Tom Neville stood there, and in his arms was Lee, close against him, bent slightly backward, her eyes closed.

"Never—never!" she was crying, an accent that was almost hysteria in her voice. "You'll never leave me again, Tom—dearest! I needed you so!"

"Never, darling!" Mike gasped at the boy's caressing voice. "Now that I've found you—"

Spade, at Mike's side, coughed apologetically.

"When it gets too hot in there for yuh," he said, "maybe yuh'll come out with the rest!"

Tom looked up, startled. Then he smiled. Lee was smiling softly, too. The boy looked at her—a deep, understanding look. Then he swept her up into his arms and jumped over the windowsill. Ten seconds later, while they all stood there, the roof of the little room caved in with a crash.

Tom grinned. "I forgot there was a fire," he said.

Spade, as they moved away, looked at Mike Costigan. "I wonder if fires are a part o' nature," he mused. "If they are, Bull sure was right."

Bull had dismounted. His back was turned to the burning building and the little group which had congregated about the Reverend Benson at the foot of the cross which he had somehow managed to drag from the flames. He was busy with his knife, working on the butt of his six-gun when they came up.

"Hell!" Mike said contemptuously. "Yuh don't mean t' say yuh counted 'em, Bull?"

The other shook his head seriously. "No. I'm just makin' one notch for the night's work—and callin' it square."

He looked long at Tom and the girl, and permitted himself the ghost of a smile. "That's sure a Hell of a way to act with a discharged employee!" he said softly.

The Three stood staring at the two who were oblivious of all else. There was a certain smug satisfaction on their features. Beneath Bull's stubble of beard, his cruel lips were relaxed for the first time that night. Then, without warning, into the silence came a cry which froze him stiff—killed the smile on his lips and drained the color from under his tanned skin. His eyes were aflame.

"Jimsy—brother—!"

Every one heard that cry, born of pain and anguish, one with the cracking, licking flames that had been cheated of their prey. Bull turned slowly, carefully, like a stone image, toward where the group around the minister had parted to show the old man bent on his knees over the figure of a woman who lay on the ground.

They were all looking at Bull. He stood staring, unable to move or speak. No one, it seemed, needed to be told the meaning of that cry—

"Jimsy—brother—!"

Even Lee and Tom had turned. The girl's face was white; Tom could only stare. Mike Costigan's unshaven jaw dropped, but Spade Allen's face was harder and more cruel than ever.

Bull took a single, inadvertent step forward as he caught sight of the girl's face when the flames leapt up. He saw her eyes, and his own eyes seemed dead. She strove to rise, and fell back into the preacher's arms weakly. Bull choked, took a quick breath—and then, in a voice that was torn with anguish, he cried—

"Millie—!"

CHAPTER XXV

Bull moved like a man in a dream. Even in his haste to conquer the space separating him from the girl, his movements were mechanical, stony. He lifted his legs like an automaton; and it was only when the preacher fell back and he folded his sister's form into his arms, that he seemed to awaken.

"Millie—little sister—my God, what have they done to you?"

His head was buried against her breast; his arms held her close. A happy, ethereal little smile had come to Millie's face as that head was pillowed there—a smile almost maternal, and with soft hands she stroked the unkempt hair that lay against her cheek.

"Millie, speak to me! You're not—?"

Bull looked up, fearful to voice what he already knew. He had not realized at first, what her position meant, the way the preacher had been holding her. Now he drew back, his eyes

staring as though they could never tear away from the widening red stain just over her heart.

"A stray bullet," the preacher was saying softly. "It came through the window, just as you came over the hill. . . ."

Bull did not hear. He could not give way to tears, either; they would not come. Only, like a graven statue that somehow finds strange warm blood coursing through its chilled veins, he held Millie close—close against his heart, his lips against her tumbled hair, his eyes unseeing.

It was a long time afterward that he looked up uncomprehending into Lee's liquid eyes as the girl touched him on the shoulder.

"Can't we get her back, Bull? Maybe something can be done?"

Bull stared. Then he seemed to understand. With a murmured, incoherent word, he got to his knees and lifted the inert figure in his arms. She lay there, frail and light as a lily stem, and Bull, heedless of the crowd all about him, started off. By instinct he made for the Palace. Perhaps it was her dress, which had impressed itself upon his mind in spite of the fact that he had not looked directly at it—but already he seemed to know the story.

Wordless, his two companions followed in his wake, and the rest of the crowd trailed after him, hushed in the face of a passion that they seemed to understand was too deep for voicing. Only the preacher lingered, when all had gone, to murmur a whispered prayer over the still figure of Lou, the dance-hall girl, where she lay under the charred cross.

The Palace was deserted. Neither Hunter or any of his men were anywhere to be seen. The bar gave evidence of the revelry which had preceded the attack; and one man still lay in a drunken stupor at the farther end, where an emptying keg of whisky dripped the last few drops from its spigot over his flushed, unheeding face.

Most of the crowd which had followed, halted in the doorway. Bull strode right through, the girl—unconscious now, in his arms, her head pillowed against his massive chest. The Vigilantes had ridden on; they were spreading out through town in an endeavor to clean up the last of the raiders. But these were nowhere to be seen. At the farther end of the street, Ben Harman was marshalling his men.

In little groups, most of the people were find-

ing their way back to their homes. The morrow was to be a big day and the night—fearful though it had been—had not taken a great toll of their own numbers.

Millie raised her head when they came opposite one of the doors that lined the balcony; and in answer to the unspoken question in her brother's eyes, she nodded weakly. Her strength was fast ebbing away. Tenderly, when he entered the room, Bull laid her upon the low bed and lighted a candle beside it.

He dropped to his knees. "Somebody's gone for a doctor, Millie," he said. "Feeling bad?"

She smiled tenderly up at him. "Not too bad, Bull. It's good to—to find you."

His eyes narrowed. "How long—?"

She seemed to understand. "I saw you—once before, Jimsy. But I didn't want you to know. I wanted to—to go before you—found me. To-night, I—tried to warn them they were—coming."

"Millie!" Bull was on his feet now. He held out the note she had sent him. "You were wrong, weren't you? He didn't—didn't marry you?" He looked meaningly at her ringless fingers.

The girl shook her head feebly and averted her eyes. With dry lips she murmured—so low that he could scarcely hear—

"I was wrong, Jim. I—I should have waited—for you."

"I'm here now." There was no emotion in Bull's voice; it was toneless, like ice. "I'm here, Millie. Tell me—*his name!*"

She stared at him fearfully, shaking her head.

"I'd have come to you before, Jimsy—but I didn't want you to—to kill—again. Don't—ask me. . . ."

"You've got to tell me, Millie, before it's too—" He stopped.

But she smiled understandingly. "I know, Jimsy. I know. But please don't make me—tell—!"

She broke off suddenly, sharply; and at the mute, awful terror and revulsion in her eyes, Bull whirled like a flash. The door had opened, and in the entrance stood Layne Hunter!

Bull had no need to ask more. He had suspected from the first; but even had he not, the look in her eyes would have told him. Hunter was staring—from the still white figure on the bed, the stain over her heart—to Bull. And

what he saw in Bull's eyes made stark, naked terror flame wildly in his own.

With a gasp he whirled and vanished.

Bull's inaction lasted less than a second. His eyes were flaming with the light of madness. As Hunter turned, he had slammed shut the door. But Bull's surge forward carried him crashing through the panel like the animal whose name he had won. With a bellow, he charged down the length of the balcony in the wake of that slim figure.

Hunter tore into an open door, locked it. But nothing could hold Bull. Head down, he charged through it, carrying away the very sash with the violence of his rush, heedless of bleeding hands and cut face and head.

Hunter had slipped through the door that led to another room. Bull hurled open the portal and charged after him. As the balcony was reached again, he caught a glimpse of the sheriff hurrying down the stairway as though the fiends of Hades were at his heels. Two of the latter's henchmen barred Bull's way.

They were as effective as a picket fence that would corral an enraged elephant. Bull, as he charged, sent his right fist out in a crash which

dislocated the jaw of his first assailant and sent the man groaning, tumbling and bouncing along the hallway. The second, at this sight, gave a cry of terror and turned on his heels.

But he was not quick enough. Roaring his rage and fury, Bull descended like a hurricane. He caught a glimpse of a pistol through the red haze before his eyes. His left hand knocked it aside just as it flashed; half swooping, but never pausing in his mad rush, he caught the man in his arms, held him high above his head, and sent him hurtling through the air.

There was a wild, piercing shriek from the helpless figure. It struck the narrow railing—there was a splintering crash; and then, carrying the rail with him, Hunter's second man hurtled fifteen feet through the air before he struck the lower floor and lay there, a limp, inert mass, his head hunched under his armpit.

Bull gained the stairs in a single leap and flung himself head foremost to the bottom. He fell, scrambled to his feet, and whirling, charged for the door to Hunter's office just as he heard the lock click.

There was the crack and roar of a powerful shotgun just as Bull's shoulder crashed into

the door panel. It gave, splintering inward, and the gun's charge ripped a hole in the wood just alongside Bull's head. He drew back—cursed, and lunged forward again.

This time the door was ripped free. Bull fell into the darkened room, brought up as a shot ripped through the gloom and a bullet whizzed past his ear—then stood blinded and impotent at another door ahead of him, beyond which he heard a mocking laugh and the galloping hoofs of two flying horses.

By the time he had leapt through the window there was nothing but the pressing darkness of the night to see. Far off was the retreating clatter of hoofbeats.

Breathing heavily, his mighty chest heaving and his muscles tightening and loosing alternately, Bull stood there for a long moment. Then at last he turned and made his way through the deserted bar, ignoring the white, strained faces in the doorway, up the stairs to the room where he had left his sister.

He was too late. Millie's eyes were closed. Her parted lips were as red as ever—parted like the child's lips they had been when he had seen them last, and peace was stamped upon the

waxen features. Bull bowed his head and the rage ebbed from his powerful frame.

Ben Harman had formed his men, their torches waving, and the vanguard, attracted by the crowd at the Palace and bent on the completion of the night's work, had entered the saloon, when Bull, the silent figure in his arms, emerged from the room at the stair head. He hesitated at the top.

The torches wavered. A sudden silence fell over the men who had entered. A circle formed at the bottom of the stairway; they sat their horses stolidly while Bull descended the steps with a slow, unheeding decision. The barroom was filled by then; but at the look on his face, the same hush crept through the ranks of the Vigilantes.

Two torches, their smoke arising straight upward, framed him as he halted with his limp burden halfway down the staircase. With dull, unseeing eyes, he swept the men who had come to put an end for all time to this house of iniquity. Over the sea of sympathetic, granite faces his glance roved. Then, comprehension seemed to come.

He nodded gravely, glanced down at the girl, and his lips moved.

"My sister," he said simply. Then, "— Hunter!"

There was no cry. Only, like the far-off rage of a seething storm beating along the shoals, there swept a low, voiceless murmur that was his answer. Men stirred; their ranks wavered as though a chill wind had swept across a field of wheat. As Bull came down, the ranks parted, and he passed silently between them—on and out into the darkness.

The torches fell as Bull gained the outdoors. In five minutes, sparks and flames were reaching from the tortured, seething walls and roof of the Palace in a raging fury of impotence into the night skies pressing down over Custer.

CHAPTER XXVI

A low wind rustled just slightly the sparse grass atop the knoll where the Reverend Benson had begun his first church. The lonely, crooked cross which had so long stood alone there, was to have company.

Morning had broken over Custer, and the village had become suddenly alive with life and action. Since dawn, wagons had been moving slowly up to the starting line of the rush. The streets seethed with activity after the victory of the night before and in preparation for the hours to come.

But except for the low, gentle voice of the old preacher, there was silence and peace upon the knoll. Even the crooked, naked cross seemed to have bent over to hear the last words that were spoken over the two fresh graves.

". . . in the mercy of God, the Father Almighty, until we be joined together again. Amen."

Bull was kneeling. Since the night before, he had heeded no one; he had not even spoken to the two companions who had been with him for so long. And they, understanding, had kept silence, too. There seemed something very near a caress in the way the gentle breeze rippled the soft grass and stirred the tufted flowers strewn over the fresh graves.

The minister looked away. Bull got slowly to his feet and looked about him. His face was cold, frozen, expressionless, and his hard eyes were like the eyes of a stone image.

Below them, now that the minister's voice had ceased and the brief ceremony was completed, the stir of the town made itself more manifest. Bull cast a careless, unseeing glance over the valley. Wagons, strings of them, and of every description, were moving up—up—up toward the frontier. Men rode or walked before or behind. Even bicycles, with their huge front wheels, were part of the procession. Some of the vehicles were mired; here a horse had broken loose and there a mule, stubborn with the excitement, refused to budge. It was a scene of tremendous activity; and beyond it,

the naked village seemed oddly desolate and forlorn. Later, it would come into its own again, when the first tumult of the rush had been spent; but now it was forgotten.

Lee's wagon had been one of those which had charged off burning down the hill toward the church the night before. Nothing remained of it, nor of the supplies left inside. But the Carleton horses were safe. The raiders, whatever their plans had been, had had to escape before cutting them loose.

Lee had occupied the tent for the remainder of the night; and Spade, Tom and Mike had rolled up in their blankets outside. Bull had not slept, but kept a silent vigil over his sister.

Hunter had disappeared. The most rigid search in every direction had failed to locate a clew as to the whereabouts of him and more than twenty of his men. They had simply vanished into thin air at the end of the fight. Millar was with them. It had been his shotgun, Bull knew, which had been fired from beyond the door of the sheriff's office the night before.

The charred remains of the Palace made a black cavity in the upright length of the main street from that distance. Mutely it seemed to

symbolize the end of Hunter's reign in the town.

Bull turned slowly to where Lee stood, her eyes moist and fixed upon him, waiting for him to move. He tried to smile; but his features—always harsh and bitter, had taken on a more cruel and masklike look than ever. It was as though he would never smile again. He moved over to her, though, and took her small hand in both his own.

"Tom an' the boys'll be takin' care of yuh, Miss Lee," he said. "Right now, yuh better be startin' and get a place in the line. The rush'll start in an hour or so."

Lee shook her head. "We're not going to leave you behind, Bull?" she cried.

"I'm stayin'," he said heavily, and glanced toward the new-made grave. "I've got somethin' to do."

"But you don't know where Hunter is!" she exclaimed, divining his meaning. "He might have sneaked across the line last night. Oh, Bull, I can't go without you!"

"But I—"

"Bull, I *won't* go without you!" Lee exclaimed. Impulsively she placed her hands on

his big shoulders and looked up at him. "Don't you realize how I'm counting on you, Bull? You can't leave me now."

He stared. Then slowly, he looked back toward that mound of earth. While the others watched him, he crossed the few feet separating him from it, and stood there with bared head. They saw his lips move, but no one heard him whisper—

"Just a little longer, little sister. Only a little longer. . . ."

Then he turned back to Lee. "All right, Miss," he said. "I'm comin' along—till the finish." He looked at Benson. "I'm right grateful, parson," he said gently. "We'll be goin' now."

Benson nodded understandingly. Slowly he put on his wide hat and turned away, toward the line of moving people. For him, there was always work. Bull turned to where Tom, Spade and Mike Costigan stood watching him, shifting uneasily until he made his decision.

"Come on, boys," he said. "We've got t' see the little lady all fixed on her claim before we head out."

It was an exciting scene which unrolled be-

fore them as they descended the hill and made for where the Carleton horses were picketed. The Three and Tom had left their own mounts behind, with little Joe Minsk, who was staying on in Custer with his "Emporium." They were all to ride the thoroughbreds, certain to outdistance the most fleet steeds in the long race. Such of these mounts as were not needed had been left behind, also.

Bull got into the saddle and the others followed. For a moment they sat watching the long procession moving up. Seemingly endless, it stretched as far back as they could see, until its rear end was hidden by the outflung shacks of the settlement, stripped and bare now that their owners were departing.

A few spoke to them as they waited there; but these, in hushed voices. There was no one in town but had heard of the tragic dénouement which had met Bull when he rode in with the Vigilantes.

It was nearing noon. With a curt word, Bull struck his spurs and they started.

For more than a mile—a mile of level, grassless earth, the line stretched out into the heat-haze to the southward. Except behind them,

there was no sign as far as the eye could see of hills or growth. Yet the soil was rich and fertile underfoot.

And opposite the line of horses, wagons, men and women, a thin string of cavalrymen sat waiting, mounted. To these troops had been assigned the task of executing the President's orders—that no man, woman or child was to be permitted to cross the deadline until noon; that whosoever disobeyed this order would never be allowed to own a single square foot of the unclaimed new land.

They were like two waiting, crouching armies, the settlers and the soldiers—the one overpowering in numbers and the other holding the ground by virtue of the power inherent in it. Authority!

Officers paced up and down behind the line of blue-clad men. As close as possible to the line, the immigrants had shoved up, an unending procession of animals and people waiting for the signal gun which would start the race across the flat country.

Beyond somewhere, in the haze hiding the western horizon, arose the Black Hills. It was there that the gold lay. The race would

be across the level, fertile ground for miles on end, to the richer fields in the blue-hazed distance. Bull, as he came up with his party on their spirited mounts, saw the minister stoop behind a big prairie schooner and scoop up a handful of earth.

In the rear of the wagon, its owner, assisted by a brawny son, was engaged in lightening the load for the race to come by dislodging a huge plow. Benson held up his hand; and when the man looked, he held out the palmful of rich earth.

"Don' throw away the plows," the old man said, so that all around him could hear. "This earth is richer than the gold in the hills—and it'll last longer. After all, remember that the soil itself contains every need of man or beast."

The man, who was a farmer, scratched his head and looked at his son. "It's so," he said, at last. "We can't all find the gold, but it ain't always you'll find soil like this—and free for the takin'."

Others who had heard followed his example. A good many plows had been dumped for the purpose of lightening the weight on the wheels.

Bull felt for the map which old Lucas had

given them. He spread it out. Tom was looking over his shoulder.

"The preacher was right, Bull," the boy said, in a low voice. "If Miss Lee'd say so—"

Bull looked up. "He sure was right, kid," he agreed. "But I don't aim the little lady should ever get her hands too dirty—so find the gold first, if yuh can. After that, when yo're sure she's safe, take to the soil. Yuh'll find it pays best in the end."

"That's so," the boy agreed. "She's got to be looked out for, first. What are you going to do, Bull—farm or dig?"

Bull looked away. "Travel," he said succinctly. "Soon as Miss Lee is settled, I travel. I ain't never dug—nor tilled, son. It ain't in me."

Tom looked at him. "You mean—you're leaving—us?"

"'Us'—yes," Bull replied grimly. He looked hard at the boy. "You an' Miss Lee aimin' t' get hitched up, pretty soon?"

Tom did not answer at once. He shot a swift glance at the girl, where she sat her saddle a few feet away astride a mettlesome thoroughbred that pawed and trembled to be let free.

She was a glorious sight, radiant in the golden sunshine, and his eyes lighted with adoration.

"Good Lord, Bull," he said reverently, "do you think, if she'd have me, there'd be any more to ask of man or God?"

Bull smiled knowingly—if the grim twist to his harsh lips could be called a smile. "She'll have yuh, I reckon," he said. "See that she does—that's yore job, son."

He turned away. The hour of noon was fast approaching. At the extreme right flank of the line, the five had chosen their positions, and the prancing Carleton mounts were cavorting and curveting up and down in eagerness. From all along the line they were the subject of envy and speculation.

Nervousness settled now upon the waiting crowds. There was a great deal of noise and bustle, a tensity of faces. The atmosphere became surcharged when three of the cavalrymen, dismounting, dropped back to where the big field gun waited to sound its discharge that would be the signal for the rush.

But the Three appeared unmoved by the rising excitement that was sending quivering waves of sentient anxiety up and down the line.

Tom sat his horse very close to Lee. Mike, his eyes on the field-gun, put out his left hand.

"Chaw, Spade?"

Spade shot him an ugly look. "Don't yuh never carry yore own?"

Mike seemed not to heed. His hand remained out. Glowering, Spade drew a plug of tobacco from his pocket and handed it over. Mike's teeth had sunk deep into the brown square when there came a sharp command, like the crack of a rifle in the deep stillness. He stuffed the plug hastily into his shirt pocket.

"Fire!"

The arm of the cavalry officer came down sharply. In the same moment, the soldier beside him jerked the charge.

Boom!

The gun recoiled. The soldiers moved into the waiting ranks across from them. In another three seconds, the blue uniforms were swallowed whole in the rush that began across the line. Like a long, undulating wave, the immigrants spread out—and with a mighty roar, seethed across the level prairie.

CHAPTER XXVII

The scene that followed was awesome, breath-taking in its rude, deep magnificence. Those few who were alone and unattached and mounted on horses got away first. A long string of them darted out from the line like arrows from a taut bowstring, and swept across the level stretch westward. Hats flew—there were shots and huzzas, and the soldiers, cheering, dropped back to rest and enjoy the remainder of the day.

Next came the lighter wagons, stripped of everything that might add weight except for the barest necessities; more than a hundred of these, their hard wheels spurning the trackless earth, got off in the wake of the horsemen. Behind them lumbered all sorts and descriptions of vehicles, heavier and loaded: these swung into a lumbering gallop. Two bicycles caused an hysterical laugh to ripple out as they took to the open.

Men afoot drove mules, urging them on with

whips and curses until they broke into an odd trot. Last, a few strayed out pitifully afoot, bent upon penetrating as far into the new territory as they might.

And over them all, an immense dust cloud came, enveloping the fleeing wagons and vehicles until they were lost in the brown mist that arose to the very heavens. Behind their backs, Custer lay, silent and inert, deserted today where yesterday it had been the scene of wild activity.

It was a mad scene, tribute and commentary of man's spirit of possession. From all corners of the country these people had come—some even from across an ocean, bearing westward, fighting desperately for the advantage of an inch over neighbors, intent upon some vague goal beyond the haze over the horizon. Dogs barked and children cried; mothers wept and fathers cursed; but the rush went on, heedless of those who dropped behind—heartless, now that the excitement had been loosed, of those less fortunate ones who met with obstacles in the take-off.

Already some wagons were out of the running. Before an hour had passed, the long,

level stretch over which the vanguard had gone, was dotted in many places by the lumbering shapes of halted vehicles. The minister, riding by slowly, saw plows emerging from the rear ends of two prairie schooners, and he smiled.

Men stopped, perspiring, to mend harness, replace broken wheels, or repair traces. Then, flaying their overheated animals violently, they leapt back into the seats of their carts and drove on again, intent upon overtaking their neighbors.

Men, wagons—wheels! Wheels—wheels—wheels—ever turning westward, toward the setting sun, toward the new land of promise! Aching hearts, hopeful eyes—always hopeful, as eyes always have been in innumerable pursuits of the Promised Land. Curses and prayers mingling—cries of anguish and defeat echoing on the heels of hysterical laughter.

And always the wheels—wheels—wheels, grinding through the earth and dust, ever moving, akin to the giant wheels of the master presses which had first ground out the news of the new land! For miles on end, nothing but turning wheels!

The Carleton group had taken the lead early.

Bull in the van, they had kept to a wedge-shaped formation. Within ten minutes, they had left the others behind. Through the early afternoon they pounded on, ever westward, until in the distance the blue-gray haze on the horizon had blended into the vague shapes of the hills, and behind them the roar of the start had faded into insignificance.

They were the first to reach the lonely cavalry outpost and watering station in the middle of the prairie loneliness. Bull drew in sharply at sight of the trough and the others followed suit. A squadron of cavalry, dismounted and resting, cheered as they came up.

"You're the first!" "Look at those horses!" "My God, this must be the Kentucky Derby!"

The thirsty beasts dove their noses deep into the water. Their owners drank from a tin cup, glancing behind. But except for a column of moving dust that ascended to the still blue skies far in the rear, there was no sign of the rest of the immigrants. Lee looked up to where Bull was rolling a cigarette.

"I didn't see Hunter," she offered. "I wonder—"

There was no need to formulate the rest of

A William Fox Picture.

"I'LL HOLD ON TO WHAT IS MINE!"

Three Bad Men.

the thought. In common with his two familiars, Bull's eyes narrowed and sought the dim outlines of the hills to the westward. He had already paused to wonder if Hunter and his men had not stolen across the line the night before. That was the one direction in which the Vigilantes had not looked—and there had been no trace of him elsewhere.

It had not been easy, if he had sneaked across. But Hunter, the night before, had been a desperate man and in the mood for long chances. Looked at theoretically, this chance was the most sane one that could have offered itself. If he had succeeded in slipping past the sentries with his men, he still had a chance at the gold in the hills before all the others. He could afford to forget the burned timbers of the Palace and his swaggering rule in Custer.

Particularly if—Bull's eyes hardened with the thought that came out of his reasoning. Hunter knew they had the map. He knew, too, that they would be ahead of the rush. With twenty or thirty men—he was still dangerous. It would be hours before the others could come up.

But there was no turning back now, no time

for hesitation. Even if Bull had wanted to for Lee's sake, it was useless. She would not consent to it, and the hazy fear which might prove entirely groundless would mean the loss of everything they had fought and worked for.

"Everybody ready?" he asked coolly.

The other two were already in their saddles; the horses, refreshed, were champing at their bits. Ahead of them was a long, level stretch, and beyond that arose the hills. Lee vaulted into the saddle and Tom followed her. Bull dug in his spurs and they were off again. A little cheer followed them from the soldiers grouped about the trough.

A little later the outpost vanished into the heat-devils of the plain, and even the high-circling column of dust in the rear became a part of the haze of distance. More slowly now, for there was a long, uphill ride ahead, the five pressed on toward the mountains.

Just past the middle of the afternoon they struck the first rising ground of the foothills and kept on. The air, somehow, was cooler. To right and left the ground was dotted with trees and growth now; and as they ascended up over the broad sweep of the foothills, the

growth increased. Black and gray rock formations had taken the place of the dark brown and yellow earth that they had left behind.

The country was broken with fissures running in every direction, and there were faint trail marks which could be followed. Bull consulted old Mart Lucas's map once or twice, assured himself that they were on the right trail, and took the lead. There was little conversation. Though the air grew more cool as they progressed toward the jagged rocks that towered into a kind of gray mist up and westward, and the afternoon waned, the pace of their mounts had slowed.

Bull had kept a sharp lookout in every direction; but it was Lee who first caught sight of the moving objects far to the south of them. They were just cresting the first rise and entering the more serried and rocky country above the line of foothills when she turned and spied them.

"Somebody else is on the trail!" she exclaimed, and pointed. If she suspected anything, she did her best to conceal it.

Bull's quick start in his saddle, however, belied the frozen calm of his face. The other two

turned also, and Tom instinctively drew his horse closer to the girl. Bull halted and whipped the telescope from his saddle bag. He held it to his eye, and the others waited. Nothing was said—only Mike, turning in his saddle, surveyed the ground ahead of them speculatively.

The moving dots that Lee had seen were men. They were moving rapidly, too, well mounted and apparently refreshed—twenty or thirty of them! For a long time Bull stared in silence, until a cream-white mare bolted out from the rest and he saw a hand pointed in his direction. His lips parted silently, and he turned to the others.

"Hunter!" he said briefly. "And he's sighted us."

Already, though, they could see that the file of men had started for them. As they got under way, a cloud of dust sprang up; evidently they were coming on at a fast gallop. Bull's frozen features were turned upon the other two, and his eyes met theirs understandingly.

There was no need for words. Hunter had slipped across the line the night before, as they had feared. He and his men had penetrated

the new country in the darkness; and with morning, had rested their mounts, waiting for their prey. It had been a foregone conclusion that the Carleton horses would carry their riders far in advance of the remainder of the rush.

Bull shot a swift, speculative glance to the rear. But there was no hope there. If he attempted to turn back now, Hunter and his men would be upon them in a few minutes, before they could even gain the level country. Even the speediest of the immigrant vanguard was not in sight.

He nodded to Spade. "Let's get goin'," he said quietly. "Maybe we can lose 'em among the hills."

That plan did seem feasible, from there. Above them, the hills were cut and criss-crossed by some playful freak of nature into a tortuous and winding jumble. It seemed that it might be easy to become lost in that mass of rocks and caverns that pushed steadily upward toward the higher peaks.

But it was farther to the first pass than they had reckoned. The trail they were following led to what had seemed from a distance like a jagged

knife-cut in a great square of precipitous rock. As they rode on, however, urging the best from their tired horses, the pass appeared to recede. It was an hour before they reached it; and during all that time, they had been in full view of Hunter's men, who were bearing down at right angles along the cliff walls and nearing with every hoofbeat of their fresher steeds.

There was no telescope needed now to see them. They were only about a mile to the rear as the pass was reached and bearing on swiftly. Hunter's white mount stood out like a flare in darkness; it had taken the lead.

Bull, his brooding eyes fixed upon him over his shoulder, felt of his rifle stock caressingly. But there was no time to halt now, not even for a wild shot. They must gain some vantage point farther on; it was their only hope, and seconds counted.

The floor of the pass was of rock. Bull in the lead, the five pounded through. Lee turned for a last glance back over her shoulder as the dark shadows of the tall rocks on either hand blanketed them and they entered the comparative cool of the gully. She could almost see Hunter's face, and the late afternoon sun

glinted from business-like rifle barrels in the outflung mass of riders. Their terrific pace startled her. There was no need for putting it into words: Hunter was out to kill—he had staked everything on a final throw, and not one of the five would be left alive when he had finished.

They were clattering up a steep hillside now, along a narrow trail where they had to ride two abreast, and where the pace was considerably halted. About a mile of this upward progress was completed, and Bull's eyes were straining for another pass, V-shaped, just ahead. He nodded to himself and then glanced at his two companions.

It was Mike Costigan who nodded agreement with the unspoken thought. Spade, as he rode, was inspecting the loading of his rifle.

The Three turned just as the path widened before it closed in on itself again to enter the narrow mouth of the steep pass. Hunter's men were just tearing through the entrance into the higher hills below them, riding at a terrific clip even over the upward rising ground.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THEY meant business and the showdown was coming soon. It was all too easy to figure out how soon. At the rate Hunter had already closed up the distance between them, it was a matter of minutes now.

Bull swung his hand toward Tom and gave a crisp order:

"Ride ahead through there—with Miss Lee!"

The boy shot him a questioning look; but at the look in Bull's face, he made no objection. His mount, breathing heavily, swerved and passed those of the Three, catching up to Lee's. Together they entered the pass.

It was a long trail—almost a quarter of a mile in length, leading between two steep sides of rock that slanted upward from the narrow road between them. About three men could ride abreast. Brush choked its sides and stunted trees grew at contorted angles out from the walls themselves. Bull, as he and his com-

panions pounded into the opening, shot a last glance over his shoulder.

Lee and Tom had halted, beside a big tree-trunk which curved up and outward from the rock face. The boy's features were white and set when he saw the Three draw up as though by common consent.

"What are you going to do, Bull?"

Bull turned to him coolly. "We're stayin' here—to hold 'em off," he said quietly. "They'll have a hard time gettin' through this pass. Yo're ridin' on with Miss Lee."

He felt inside his shirt and withdrew the old prospector's map. "Here—take this with yuh."

Lee interposed. "But we can't leave you here, Bull—!"

"Why not?" he roared. "Ain't I in command here. You'll have t' do as I say, Miss Lee, and keep goin'."

"But—" Tom shook his head in expostulation.

"You too!" Bull exclaimed. "Don't stand here talkin', son—get as far on as yuh can. We'll ride up later." He hesitated, and his

eyes met Tom's. "Them's orders. Have yuh forgotten that I want to meet Hunter?"

Tom stared at the girl. After all, there was but one thing to do, and he knew better than to argue with Bull. Lee had to have company, and none of the Three would budge from this spot. That was a foregone conclusion.

"You'll join us—later?" the girl faltered, before the stern look in Bull's cold eyes.

"O' course!" he exclaimed. "Take a look at this place—can y' imagine anybody able to get past here?"

She nodded. Tom took a swift look around and whirled. "All right," he agreed. "We'll wait along the trail—farther up, Bull," he said. Then, catching Lee's bridle, he turned her mount and started off. He understood; and before the dictum in Bull's eyes there was no argument.

The Three stood watching them. Then slowly, and with careful deliberation, they dismounted, drawing the rifles from across the saddles as they did so. They drew up side by side, Bull in the center, across the middle of the road, and waited.

There was no vestige of expression on any of

the hard faces. They simply waited, their eyes fixed on the mouth of the pass. If they knew what was to come, they gave no evidence of it. Spade put out his hand without turning.

"Yuh kept my plug, damn yuh, Mike. Let's have it."

Mike glowered at him and drew from his shirt pocket the plug he had stuck there so hastily when the gun sounded. Before he passed it, he took a large bite. Bull handed it on, stopping to gnaw off a piece for himself. When Spade received it, there was not a full-sized chew. He regarded it resentfully.

"Damn' hogs," he grunted.

But the others paid him no attention. They remained in silence, with their eyes fixed on the pass mouth, waiting, their rifles across their arms. It was Mike who spoke at last. His eyes squinted at the point where their enemies must emerge at any moment.

"D'yuh know, Bull, one man alone could hold this pass against an army!"

Bull looked at him, and Spade followed suit. Then they looked back at the pass mouth.

"Yo're right," he said. "No sense in you two stayin' here an' gettin' shot up, when yuh

might be with the little lady. Git goin'—I'm big enough t' handle it."

"Or me," Spade put in. "She might need you, Bull—I ain't so important." His voice was laconic, careless.

Mike swore heavily. "Damn both yore hides! When I said a man, I meant a *good* man! I was thinkin' o' myself."

"No—it'll be me," came from between Bull's hard lips.

"The Hell it will! Didn't I think of it?" Mike swore angrily.

Spade was fumbling in his waistcoat. Without replying to Mike at once, he held out his deck of cards. They looked at him questioningly; but he did not return the look. He only shifted the tobacco in his mouth and kept his stony eyes on the pass mouth.

"Cut for it," he said succinctly. "That's the only way to settle it. High man stays an' has the party with Hunter."

"Cut—with you, yuh damned card-sharp!" Mike exploded. "Why, yo're so crooked with them cards yuh could pull an ace from a gun-barrel—!"

Spade fixed him with a fierce look. "Don't

call me a crook!" he hissed. "I don't stand that, Mike, from no man—"

"Shut up!" came coldly from Bull, and the two obeyed, still glowering at each other. "We'll cut—as yuh say, Spade—but no tricks!"

He held out his hand and took about fifteen cards from the top of the deck. Holding up the bottom one, he saw a ten of spades. His expression unchanged, he waited until Mike grunted soulfully, and looked. Costigan had drawn a three of hearts. The two exchanged a swift look.

Carefully, Spade made his cut. He held it out.

It was an ace—of spades!

He shifted his tobacco. "Reckon that settles it," he said coolly. "You boys better be hikin'."

Mike cursed angrily. "Yuh dirty crook!" he cried. "You cheated—!"

But Bull held up his hand. When Mike looked at him, he knew they were to obey the verdict of the draw. Bull turned to Spade, who was not looking at him, and held out his hand.

"So long, Spade."

"So long, Bull." Spade's face had not re-

laxed. He tried to keep his eyes on the pass; but suddenly he turned upon Bull—almost pleadingly. "Don't tell the little lady—make her think I made it—the other way round."

Bull nodded agreement. "Good luck," he said gruffly, and then swallowed hard. "See yuh—see yuh later, Spade!"

"Yeuh." Bull turned back to his horse and mounted heavily.

Mike was standing at Spade's side. "See yuh later, Spade," he gulped, and gave him a rough blow on the shoulder. "Keep that chaw in yore mouth—it'll steady yore sight." He hesitated, then put out his hand. "So long, old timer."

"So long, Mike." For a long time Mike looked into the squinting eyes of the man with whom he had quarreled and fought so often. "So long." His voice hesitated, just slightly, and his face grew sterner than ever.

"Ain't it better t' go clean—for her, than t' pull up at the end of a rope? Forget it, Mike." He pushed awkwardly at the other's shoulder. "Some day, when she's safe, yuh can tell her that Spade was—only too glad." He swung

about fiercely. "Now get goin', damn yuh—I got business to 'tend to, and I don't want no amateurs around."

Mike nodded, turned slowly away, and got into his saddle. He and Bull paused momentarily as they swung the heads of their beasts. Spade did not look around; he was standing in the center of the road, his horse just behind him, a lonely, gaunt figure, with the stovepipe hat set firmly on the top of his head and the rifle across the crook of his arm.

"So long, Spade. . . ."

It was a whisper, never answered. Spade did not turn when they rode away.

He stood there unmoving, except for once when he placed his hand with an instinctive gesture upon the six-gun at his hip. Until the clatter of his companions' retreat had died away, and faintly there was borne to his ears the sound of the charging hoofs of Hunter and his men. Then his figure seemed to tense a little; he shifted, still waiting.

Suddenly, with scarcely any warning, a broad sombrero appeared over the edge of the trail. Spade's feet were planted. In less than a sec-

ond, he had swung his rifle to his shoulder, aimed, and fired. There was a gasp of mingled pain and surprise and the head fell back.

"One!" Spade muttered through his tight lips.

A second man, though, was on the heels of his first victim, and his mount carried him into the pass before he could rein in frightened and terror-stricken, as though recognizing his doom. Wildly he drew back his horse to its very haunches, strove madly to loose his revolver—and then Spade fired again. With a scream, the man tumbled from his mount, and riderless, it charged back upon the outlaws waiting on the trail below.

These had all scattered by then. Spade caught glimpses of them seeking the cover of boulders and trees about the mouth of the pass. He knew what to expect—a rifle duel, which would cover time enough for his friends to get far away.

He swung coolly and grasped the bridle of his riderless thoroughbred. The horse balked; but, his eyes on the pass, Spade forced its head down. The animal lay flat on its side.

Spade dropped behind it, still keeping a hold on the bridle. The horse rolled frightened eyes at him as he got in place.

Spade shifted his quid and considered. A rain of shots came, but none struck near; they all went high. He got to his feet and pulled the horse after him.

"No use o' gettin' you all shot up, too," the bad man said coolly. "Get goin', old hoss—they might need you!"

And with a hard slap on the animal's flank, he sent it galloping off up the trail in the wake of Bull and Mike. Then he turned again toward the pass mouth. Another sombrero showed. Spade aimed carefully and fired. It dropped. He nodded approval of his own work.

A tree grew out from the side of the cliff wall. Spade considered it; and then, crossing, half concealed himself by its gnarled trunk and managed to rest his rifle nicely along the curve. He waited.

He had not long to wait now, however. Hunter was impatient. From rock to rock his men ducked, taking advantage of every bit of cover that offered, advancing slowly until about eight

of them were well inside the mouth of the pass and concealed. Behind them, their companions kept up a hail of bullets.

It was difficult now for Spade to fire. Each time his head came up, it was the signal for a rain of shots, and lead was spattering about his uncovered feet and stomach where they projected beyond the side of the tree.

Taking careful aim, heedless of the volley that the appearance of his head brought, Spade fired again. He missed, swore softly, and pressed the trigger a second time. It clicked on an empty chamber. Just as he dropped the rifle and reached for his pistol, a chip of bark flew from the tree and a stray bullet, with a ricochet, cleared the hat from his head. In the same instant, he drew up sharply at a searing pain in his left thigh.

Bullets were raining all about now. He took careful aim with his revolver, fired, and then groaned as a bullet plowed the length of his arm where it lay across the tree-trunk, embedding itself with a stabbing fire in the flesh of his shoulder. Another one came—one of twenty—but it found its mark in his groin.

Spade slumped. He could no longer raise

himself up to his former position. There was a momentary lull in the firing; then the outlaws grew bolder at his inaction, and it came more furiously than ever. A bullet lodged in his right leg this time. Spade slumped again. He was too weak to recover his position now, and lay only half hidden by the tree.

The blood from his wounds dyed hands and clothing. He attempted to lift his pistol, got it as far as his hip, and leaned out to fire, a grim smile on his face. One of Hunter's men, just rising behind a rock, threw up his hands and spun about. Spade grunted soulfully.

But in the same instant, he clapped both hands to his side and the pistol fell from his hands. Even as he fell backward, another shot came and a red stain appeared in his neck.

Still smiling, Spade lay back. He fumbled with weak fingers for his deck of cards and withdrew them. There was no more to be done. He could not get into position to fire again—could not even reach the pistol where it lay a few feet away.

There was only a fat little lizard watching when Spade laid out the cards weakly on the rock beside him. He commenced a game of

solitaire; and looking up, saw the creature. His hard mouth set in a grim smile.

"Come t' see my finish, pardner?" he grunted, and the breath came in a stiff hiss through his teeth. "Well, stick around. I've got seven, and I'm—still—dealin'!"

The reptile blinked and hunched closer, ignorant of the outlaws, who, at Spade's fall, had become emboldened. They were rushing now from rock to rock, standing upright, while those behind kept up a hail of fire over their heads. Hunter's voice was urging them on.

Spade felt himself going. It was a question of seconds now—and only a lizard to see the finish. Well, it had been a glorious one, anyhow, he thought. At least five of Hunter's men —and one or two wounded. The cards went down methodically; they seemed Spade Allen's only interest in life. In his last moments, he had turned to his first love.

"Seven—an ace—!"

Crack! A bullet plowed across his chest and embedded itself deep there. Spade gave a gurgling cough. He looked up, the last card still in his fingers.

Hunter's men were rushing now. On horse-

back, the rear moved forward at a gallop through the gully. Spade's eyes were fast glazing. He watched them, smiling; but he did not lay down the last card. Instead, his feeble fingers searched inside the hat band of the tall hat that had been knocked off. His hand emerged with the little derringer he always carried there.

The outlaws came on fiercely now. He saw Hunter's face; but the man, after a casual, contemptuous glance at him, swept on. The others came in his wake.

Spade raised his hand slowly; he had to rest it against his chest. One of the riders saw him —glimpsed the gun—aimed. But Spade's shot came first. The two guns streaked flame at once. The rider toppled sidewise from his saddle—there was an oath.

Spade's tall figure tightened. As three guns barked at once, he smiled again, stiffened and fell back for the last time. In his nerveless fingers a card was still held.

Slowly it fluttered to the ground, making the lonely lizard move while the horsemen rattled by—an ace of spades.

CHAPTER XXIX

The shots in the pass had been heard on the trail above, though their portent no one could tell. Tom and the girl had pressed steadily on. They had been going for more than a quarter of an hour before they pulled up in alarm at the sound of pounding hoofbeats behind them. Tom loosed his gun.

In the next instant, Bull and Mike Costigan rounded a curve in the road and bore down.

"Keep goin'!" Bull shouted. "Spade's holdin' 'em down there."

The girl shot him a questioning look, but there was no knowledge to be gained from Bull's set features. He urged them forward. But the horses were tired. Thoroughbreds though they were, they had not the stamina for this kind of work. Steadily they plodded up the incline, which was becoming steeper every minute.

East of them, a mighty waterfall rolled through a defile in the rocks and descended with

a terrific roar into the chasm below it. For a time, as they rode on, the volume of sound from this hid the reports that had come from below.

Then, as they rounded another turn and took to a steeper path at a fast walk, the shots could be heard again—more furious, this time—and suddenly there was a dead silence. Mike and Bull looked at each other. The girl shot them a quick glance.

A moment later, Spade's riderless horse dashed past them at a fierce gait. They all stared. Even to the girl, this message was clear. Spade had sent on his mount; he would not need it any more.

The path they were following flattened out at the mouth of a ravine a little further on. Jagged hills fell away from the table of rock, towering magnificently upward, black and gorgeous in their primeval crudity. As they reached the spot, Mike's eyes fell on the dark mouth of a long-deserted mine shaft and a little shack near by, at the mouth of the ravine. He pulled up, and by common consent the others followed suit.

"Reckon I'll stick here awhile," Mike decided. "I'm goin' t' wait for Spade."

Bull nodded. Lee opened her lips to protest, but Bull cut her off. "It's all right," he said. "Mike knows what he's doin', and Spade's probably took most o' the fight out o' them. We'll wait for 'em up the trail."

It was the fact that he rode with them that decided Lee in favor of obeying. Ignoring the mute plea in her eyes, he nodded his head and gestured her to be on her way.

"Come, Lee," Tom murmured. "Bull's coming along."

She obeyed mutely. She was tired and worn from the long pull, and her little face was white and drawn. She looked back once, as they entered the ravine, at where Bull and Mike stood at the edge of the spur, looking downward.

"You're sure they'll come, Tom?"

He nodded. "Bull won't go back on his word. He'll be right along. You're tired," he accused.

"A little." She tried to smile. "Oh, Tom, I'm afraid. These black mountains—they seem pressing in as if they were alive. I'm afraid of this place, and—and everything." Inadvertently she looked back over her shoulder.

"You're only worn out, dear," he said soothingly. "Soon we'll be able to stop. Up above,

in the sunlight, these mountains will seem glorious to you. We're in the valleys now."

"In the valleys . . ." she repeated, and slowly nodded.

Bull was gazing down the steep pathway over which they had just come. Turning, at Mike's move, he read the sign on the door of the tumbledown shack behind them:

GOVERNMENT POWDER STORE

Forest Survey

KEEP OUT!

"Reckon Spade oughta be along in a minute." Mike was not looking at his companion when he spoke.

Bull nodded without reply. "I'm ridin' along, Mike," he said emotionlessly, and put out his hand.

Mike nodded, accepting the proffered hand. "Yeuh," he agreed. "You gotta stick with them kids, Bull. It ain't no time to take chances, after all the trouble we took gettin' 'em together."

Bull nodded again. "That all, Mike?" he said softly.

"Reckon so." Mike looked up with a grin. "Only maybe, if the little lady ever asks why I turned so plumb bad—tell her I wasn't so bad as I looked. Tell her—tell her it was women, Bull, when I was young. Women and—and Methodists. Now—so long!"

"*Adios!*"

Bull said no more. Mounting swiftly, he swung his horse about, and with no further word or backward look, hastened on over the trail in the wake of Lee and Tom.

Mike, after a glance about him, went to the door of the shack and threw his weight against it. It gave inward. Inside was a musty, uninhabited darkness. Fumbling, he made his way around scattered powder cans and at length discovered two windows which drew inward and hooked on the low ceiling.

From the rear aperture he looked out. He was alone. Nearer at hand, he saw Bull Stanley's powerful black clattering over the stones of the ravine. And farther on, just emerging from the shadows of the valley into the late

afternoon sunlight, rode Tom and Lee, headed for the higher slopes.

Mike brushed a cautious hand across his squinting eyes and then raised the hand in a last salute—unseen.

"*Adios—amigos!*" he whispered softly.

That was the only sign of weakness he permitted himself. Resting his rifle against the wall, he lighted a candle and set about making the door fast. Then he raised the front boards over the window that looked back over the trail along which the outlaws would come. Fastening it overhead, he sat down on a full powder keg and waited.

He stuck his pipe in his mouth and filled it. But there was no time for lighting it. Even as he was feeling for his match, he heard a yell from the trail, and the first of Hunter's men appeared over the ridge.

Crack! Mike's rifle spoke in a flash. The man tumbled backward without a sound. He heard Hunter's fierce shouted command, and then silence. But he knew what was happening. The outlaws were spreading out below the ridge and taking the excellent cover afforded there.

A volley of shots a moment later confirmed this. At the close range from which they were fired, they rattled through the thin boarding of the shack as though it had been pasteboard, spattering against the ceiling. Mike raised his eyebrows.

At any moment—Crack! He shuddered and put his hand to his throat. A stray bullet had plowed through the wall and struck. The hand came away red. Mike grinned.

Slipping his rifle through the opening, he commenced a steady fire. One—two—three—four—! Hunter's men dropped in quick succession as they tried to fire. Mike breathed more easily.

They dropped back now, cautious in the face of the single rifleman's deadly aim. Mike fired again, and then realized that he had exhausted his cartridges.

The heat of the firing increased. On every side of him now the boarding was like a sieve. Another shot came and Mike slumped as it struck. But he only grinned, feeling for his pistol.

Raising it, he sighted carefully over the windowsill. It spurted flame once—twice! There

was an oath, commingled with a shriek of pain, and Mike's lips, under his stubble of beard, twisted contemptuously. A second later the shack seemed humming with lead; it whistled and tore all about him, sending up huge splinters from the windowsill and crashing into the ceiling. Hunter's crisp voice continued his cool commands.

Mike stood staring. The pistol was still in his fingers, but they were dripping with blood. There was no way of knowing how many times he had been hit in that volley. Slumping against the wall, chuckling madly, he drew out his knife and commenced to notch the pistol butt.

There was one charge left in it. Mike grinned —but it was a painful grin, twisted with the torture of his burning wounds. In both hands he got the pistol up over the sill.

A sombrero showed. He fired. Silence—but the sombrero had disappeared.

The pistol fell. Mike felt for a match and finally succeeded in striking it against the boards. Painfully he raised it to his pipe and drew in. A cloud of smoke came out. Carelessly he threw the match to the floor.

Hunter's men had stopped firing; but there

was no need for any more. Mike tottered across the room and fell in a heap among stacked powder tins. Weakly, he drew off his boots, one after the other; and then smiled when the operation was completed.

"There! I always said I wasn't a-goin' t' die with my boots on—and I win!"

He was laughing hysterically when the rush came. He heard a few horses come galloping up—then Hunter's voice, on the heels of a last wild volley of shots that pierced through the shack:

"Go ahead and finish him—right. I'll ride on after the others. Come on, Jeff!"

Something heavy landed against the door. Mike sat back puffing slowly, his arm around the top of an opened can of powder, cradling it close to his slumping frame. The door gave. He had a momentary vision of a score of rifle muzzles, all pointed at him, of a crowd of men—and he grinned with relief.

One of them snarled. But Mike raised his hand before the last shot could come.

"Jump in," he said weakly. "You win, boys—but I'll bet yuh can't shoot before I'm finished, anyhow."

"That's what we're aimin' on, *amigo,*" the man addressed sneered. He wore a dirty bandage about his head. "Y' ain't got enough holes in yuh yet, *sabe?* We come t' remedy it, and we're right glad we ain't too late."

"Mighty thoughtful of yuh," Mike agreed, puffing furiously at his pipe and watching as the curious outlaws huddled together inside the doorway. His voice was inordinately weak.

"Reckon yuh got a right t' yore own enjoyment, pardner," he faltered. "It's all the same to me, anyhow. Only—come closer before—yuh shoot. I—got a riddle—"

He was laughing now, a choking laugh, and puffing more furiously than ever at his short pipe. "Just—a—riddle—"

"No stunts!" the leader of the outlaws snarled. "Get it off yore mind—pronto! We got work to do."

"So have I." Mike was grinning but his strength was fast ebbing. "A—lot. Here it is—the riddle."

The men were looking at each other nervously now; the rifles wavered. They commenced to sense something back of Mike's chuckling, gurgling laugh. A sort of panic swept over

them. But it was too late. Even as the first man moved toward the doorway, Mike continued—

"The riddle: Where was—Moses—when the lights—went out?"

There was a scream of terror. In the last second, the leader of the outlaws had understood. He saw Mike raise his pipe, tilt it sidewise, still laughing—and that was all!

The lighted tobacco fell among the grains of black powder. There was an explosion—a single one, and Mike was blotted out. Not a tenth of a second later, with a mighty, resounding roar that echoed over hill and valley, the crash came. Like the shriek of a host of demons, the powder in the shack went off.

Higher than the very tips of the jagged palisades on either side of the little shack the remnants flew. The shack was blotted from the face of the earth, its parts and its burden ascending to the very skies in a roaring flame that shook the black rocks all around it—a flame, a puff of white, red and searing smoke that billowed, hesitated, and then died down.

That was all—though it was nearly an hour before the mouth of the valley had cleared

A William Fox Picture. *Three Bad Men.*

SHE STOOD BESIDE HIM NOT KNOWING THE SECRET PLAN THAT WAS IN HIS MIND.

again, and then there was no sign that men had ever been there, beyond scattered splinters of wood and twisted pieces of metal.

Mike Costigan, the Python, had finished in a style worthy of an emperor.

CHAPTER XXX

Lee had come out of the valley. Just behind her, Tom spurred his mount over the last stretch of a steep trail, and together they looked ahead over a broken country stunted with wild growth, green with living things—even trees. The late afternoon sunlight fell slantwise, lighting it all with a golden radiance. Here all was silence and peace.

Tom glanced at the map. "We're here," he said cheerfully. "It's no more than a mile ahead—beyond that coulee over there, probably—" Pointing to where there was an abrupt drop in the ground and a welter of green trees cowered together from the bottom and over the sides of the depression.

Lee turned instinctively. Far below, they could hear the clatter of hoofbeats. They waited. Just as the lone rider came in sight, Lee gave a glad little cry.

"It's Bull—he *did* come!"

He rode up with set face. Lee looked at him.

"Is Mike—coming?" she faltered.

He nodded briefly and turned away. "He'll be all right. He's with Spade. They're—they're together."

She stared at him questioningly, trying to divine a meaning under the careless words. Tom needed no information—he knew. Bull, however, had turned away. In that instant, they all jerked up sharply as the terrific roar of a mighty explosion far down in the valley seemed to shake the very earth upon which their horses stood.

Bull looked at his two companions and they at him. The question in Lee's eyes was repeated.

"That'll be Mike," he said softly. "He's takin' care of 'em, I reckon."

The explosion died away. Lee drooped wearily in her saddle. Bull, at the sight of something moving far below him, turned and loosed his telescope, drawing it to his eyes.

A second later, he cursed in a soft voice. Hunter! Hunter and one companion. As he let the glass fall, an expression of vicious, towering rage spread over his fierce features, and his eyes lighted with flame.

Hunter—alive! First Millie, then Spade—now Mike Costigan. . . . And Hunter still rode free; the sun of the high hills was in his handsome, sneering face, and the clean winds could still sweep against him as he rode on. He could still see God's sunlight and hold a bridle—and laugh! And Millie lay under the little mound outside Custer—Spade was silent in the pass far below. Mike had gone his own grim way. . . .

Bull's lips scarcely parted as he turned to his companions. "Ride on," he said briefly, and his voice was so deadly that even Tom said nothing.

They reached the break in the ground. Bull turned and looked over his shoulder. Then he halted.

"Hunter's comin'," he said briefly. "I'm meetin' him here. Ride on, Tom—with Miss Lee."

Lee had already gone on a few paces. Now she halted.

"Bull!" she cried, in a broken voice. "Not—not you, too!" In the cry was knowledge—understanding at last of what that last rattle of shots in the pass had meant—comprehension of

Bull's words when he said that Mike and Spade were together.

Bull faced her sternly. "Yuh heard my orders," he said. "We had it all out—back there, before we started. Hunter's mine. Now go!"

Before the fierce command in his eyes, her own glance fell. Turning, she allowed her mount to take the narrow trail that led in among the trees. Bull swung about slowly to face Tom. The boy was standing there; he had dismounted, and his challenging gaze met that of the older man.

"Well," demanded Bull with menacing softness, "why ain't yuh gone with Miss Lee?"

"I'm not going," Tom returned stubbornly. "Do you think I'm blind? This is the finish. Mike and Spade are both gone. I've run for the last time—*sabe?*"

Bull dismounted slowly, and coming up, stood towering over him like a minor giant. His eyes were narrow, fierce.

"Did yuh hear me tell y' to go?" he asked. "S'pose anything happens to you—what about her? Yuh damn' selfish young—"

"I'm staying, Bull." The boy's face was determined, his voice was cool and level, and his

eyes met those of Bull steadily, without flinching. "I told you I've run for the last time. There's two of them, and there's two of us. One apiece. When our work's finished, I'll go after Lee."

There was no gainsaying him. He scarcely noticed when Bull's right foot fell backward and he balanced. That was all he knew. Bull's fist came up from nowhere, with the mighty, powerful drive of a sledge-hammer, and it struck Tom full on the side of the jaw. The boy, without a cry, tumbled backward, his arms outspread, and fell at full length on the grass, unconscious.

Bull stared down at him grimly. Then, stooping, he picked up the still figure with unwonted tenderness and held it in his arms. With long strides, he made off after Lee.

The girl was just inside the screen of the trees. Beside a fallen, rotting trunk, Bull deposited his burden and looked up into her startled eyes.

"He forgot who was givin' orders, Miss," he said quietly. "Keep a watch over him—he'll come to in a minute. And I'll—I'll be back."

She said nothing, only stared as Bull swung

on his heel and made off. Before he passed out of sight, however, he turned—hesitantly. He seemed groping for words.

"He's a great kid, Miss Lee," he said at last. "Game kid. I hope"—he hesitated—"well, I reckon he—he'll take care of yuh. *Adios!*"

Bull emerged from the trees and came out into the open, in sight of the place where the upward trail curved about a group of boulders and drew out on the table land. Unslinging his rifle automatically, he gave his mount a pat on the flank and sent him trotting into the woods.

Then, the rifle under his arm carelessly, he set to work with fastidious intent to roll a brown paper cigarette. He heard the nearing hoof-beats just as his tongue slid along the edge of the paper; but he made no move. He groped for a match and found one.

There was something of fatality in his pose. Even the anger had seeped from his eyes and face. His hard lips were a straight line under a week's stubble of beard; and in place of anger, a calm mask had settled upon his lined features. No expression was there; his was the face of a statue.

Millie . . . Mike . . . Spade . . . Bull knew

what the next few seconds would bring. He was as certain as if it had already happened. There was nothing in all of life beside this meeting with Hunter; and Bull was as certain of its outcome as though it had already become history.

The match slid along his trousers. Even as it flamed, there came on the heels of the dead silence the single, vicious spurt of a rifle. Bull caved inward at the stomach as the bullet struck. He had seen the flash. He saw the man behind the rifle now, his head moving along the line of boulders.

He took a deep inhalation of his cigarette, and his rifle and match dropped together. Swaying slightly, his eyes narrowed to tiny slits, he drew his pistol. It reached his hip. There was no expression on his face when he fired.

Crack! The shot sped true. It received no answer—beyond the flame and the single crack, there was no sound. The man behind the boulders straightened up, his rifle fell, and with a round mark in the center of his forehead, he dropped backward, tumbling over the edge of the incline.

It was Jeff Millar.

Bull felt weak, sick. The cigarette drooped

from his dry lips. He had to look to assure himself that the pistol was in his fingers—they were numb, dead. He swayed—just as another flash came and a piece of lead was embedded in his shoulder.

His left hand met a boulder as he fell—a huge one. His powerful frame, head down, sprawled over it, sagged weakly down to the earth. His head was swimming; he seemed part of an immense gray fog through which the snarling, saturnine features of Hunter stood out like a nightmare.

Oddly, there was still no uncertainty. He was dying—and yet he knew!

Hunter was moving toward him, his pistol ready. As Bull, sagging farther behind the boulder, raised his head weakly, he saw the sheriff's pistol smoke again, though he could not hear the shot. Something hot and burning seared down through his chest.

Another shot—his right arm was numbed and he stared blankly at the blood pouring from just above his elbow.

Hunter was laughing. Bull had a momentary recollection of the way he had left Tom Neville, unconscious. He saw Hunter's smoking gun—

the man was very close. Mike and Spade were somewhere in the mist closing about him, laughing.

Only Bull's shattered arm rested across the rock now. But the last bullet had not struck the bone. Hunter halted, his pistol out and leveled at a point between his eyes, leaning easily, with his usual grace, against the side of a big rock which stood alone, towering over him.

Bull stared at him. Stared hard. Couldn't he pull that trigger? Of course—Spade said he could. Mike laughed, watched carefully. They were judging him—but they knew he would!

It seemed æons before Hunter got ready to fire—and then suddenly Bull knew that after his enemy fired, it would be over. Not even a chance for that last shot—!

The two jets of searing red flame came at once. Somehow, Bull managed to see his shot strike home, managed to twist his white, hard lips in a last snarling sneer as Hunter's white hand reached toward his heart and the sheriff's slender figure straightened like a puppet on a string. He leaned hard against the rock, choked, then turned slowly about, like a drunken

man—still stiff and taut. And then, without bending, he fell headlong.

But before he struck the ground, Bull's head had dropped with a sigh, and the rock that pillowed it was stained with a gush of vivid red that was like a curse in the fading golden sunlight and the silence that came upon the spot.

"Millie—Spade—Mike—I'm coming . . . !"

Thus were the three bad men, never separated in life, joined together again. Bull had known it must be so.

CHAPTER XXXI

The reign of terror had ended. With the close of that very day, peace came over the promised land. Some men found gold and others found the earth; but men and women had found their heart's desire in the new land of promise.

Over the wide plain across which the rush had charged, farms had begun to spring out. Benson, as he rode across the country doing his work, smiled often to himself at the sight of the plows. The earth in the lower country, jealous of its gold, had given a greater wealth to those who had found it.

On one of these farms, Tom and Lee found their place at last. Lucas's claim had been found, worked—and sold. The gold was good, but in it there was no peace; and afterward, as the months went by, the two who were alone found the need of peace and a gentler life. Scarcely a year after the last of the Three had gone down with his last enemy, Jim Stanley

Costigan Allen Neville was born into the new land.

The violent days of the rush faded swiftly from memory. The Vigilantes had disbanded; and instead of Layne Hunter, the Reverend Benson's voice was heard. So swiftly did those other scenes vanish that in time they came to seem like a far-off dream—even to Tom and Lee.

Only the Three remained real, always near, always hovering somehow like insistent, brooding shadows—on guard still. Peace and plenty had come out of violence and terror, and the little, vine-clad cottage at the base of the looming Black Hills suggested nothing of the fierce days and lurid nights fast receding into history.

Tom and Lee were happy, together.

The days faded into years and the echoes of the great rush into the Promised Land died away to a record on a printed page. But sometimes, as Lee would stand in her doorway just before twilight, with the sun slanting at that golden angle that she would never forget—as she watched the youngster who was growing each day to look more like Tom, at play in the garden—at those times there seemed three fa-

miliar shadows blending with the golden shower of the sun.

Three shadows on horseback—one small, head cocked to one side thoughtfully; one thin and tall, immobile; and one powerful as a kindly giant.

The shadows seemed to be watching, too, in approval. And then, as the sun sank lower over the horizon, it was hard for Lee to believe that they were not real, what with the mist that clouded her dark eyes—when they would turn contentedly and gallop off over the ridge into the sunset—together as always.

THE END

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